# Rolling Stone

INDIA

APRIL 2024
ISSUE 196

king

PRESENTS

future of music

FEATURING

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KARAN KANCHAN

TABA CHAKE

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HANUMANKIND

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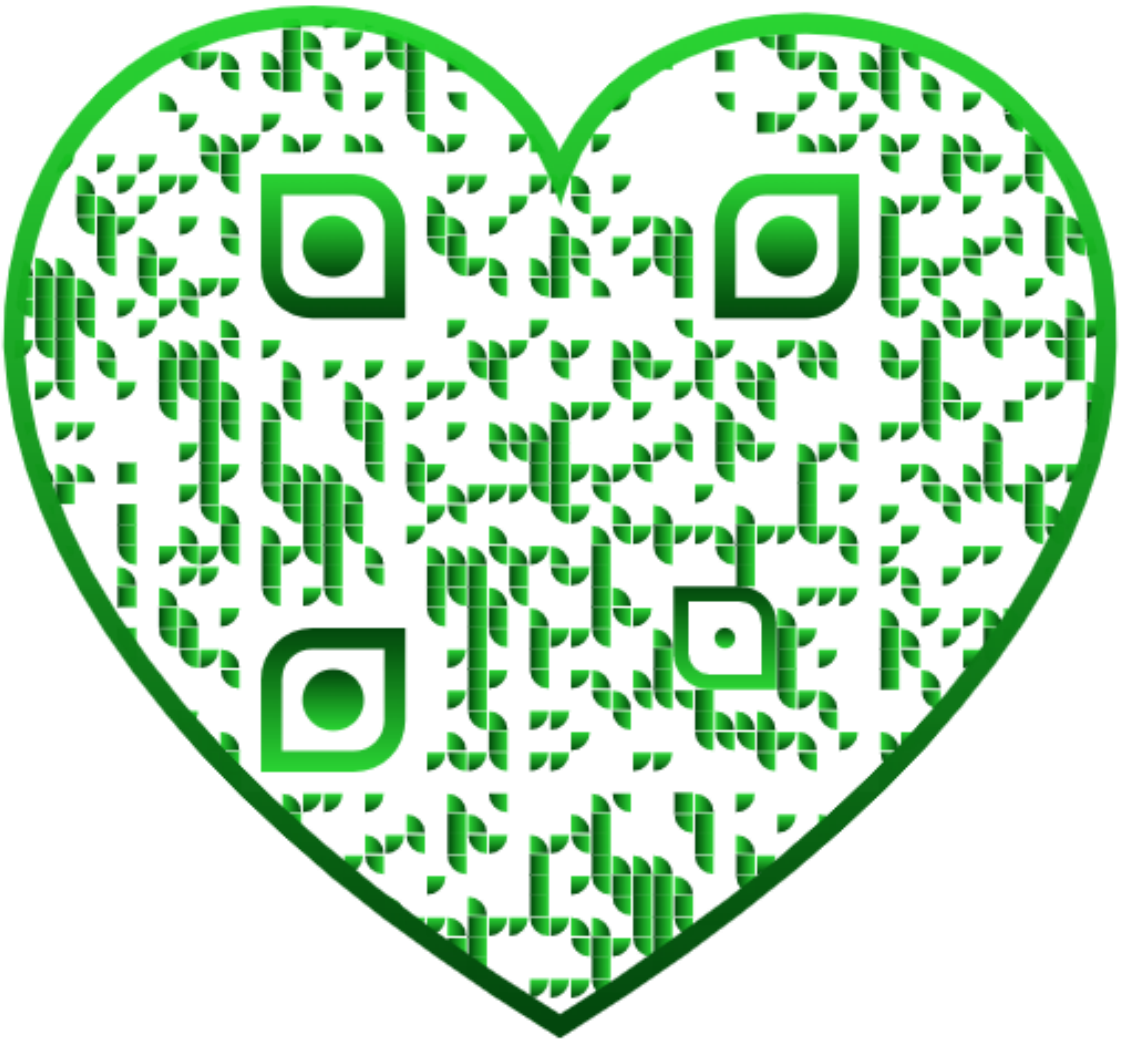

# Contents

RS INDIA

**ISSUE 196**
'ALL THE NEWS
THAT FITS'

**60**

## They Don't Call Him King for No Reason

Veracity, talent, strategic moves and everything in between

By Peony Hirwani

**70**

## Future of Music

The campaign includes a diverse range of artists from hip-hop to singer-songwriters and everything in between

# Contents

## The Mix


10 **A. R. Rahman Toasts 'The Unsung' in New Song with Firdaus Orchestra**
The master composer discusses the growth and importance of the all-female ensemble created in Dubai and how the 'only way to survive is to do new things'

15 **'Love Is Not a F—ing Game,' Kamakshi Khanna Delivers a Poignant Message on Modern Relationships**
The track off the Mumbai-based singer-songwriter's forthcoming EP

18 **Swarathma Returns with New Music After Three Years**
The Bengaluru folk-rock band teases their upcoming album with the latest track 'Raushan'

19 **Tejas Delivers Sarangi-Infused, Shimmering Pop on New EP 'Museum'**
The Mumbai-based singer-songwriter imbues Indian classical elements into the time-bending four-track record

90 **MC Stan Is Living in 2050**
The Pune rapper's significance in the Indian music scene goes beyond his musical prowess


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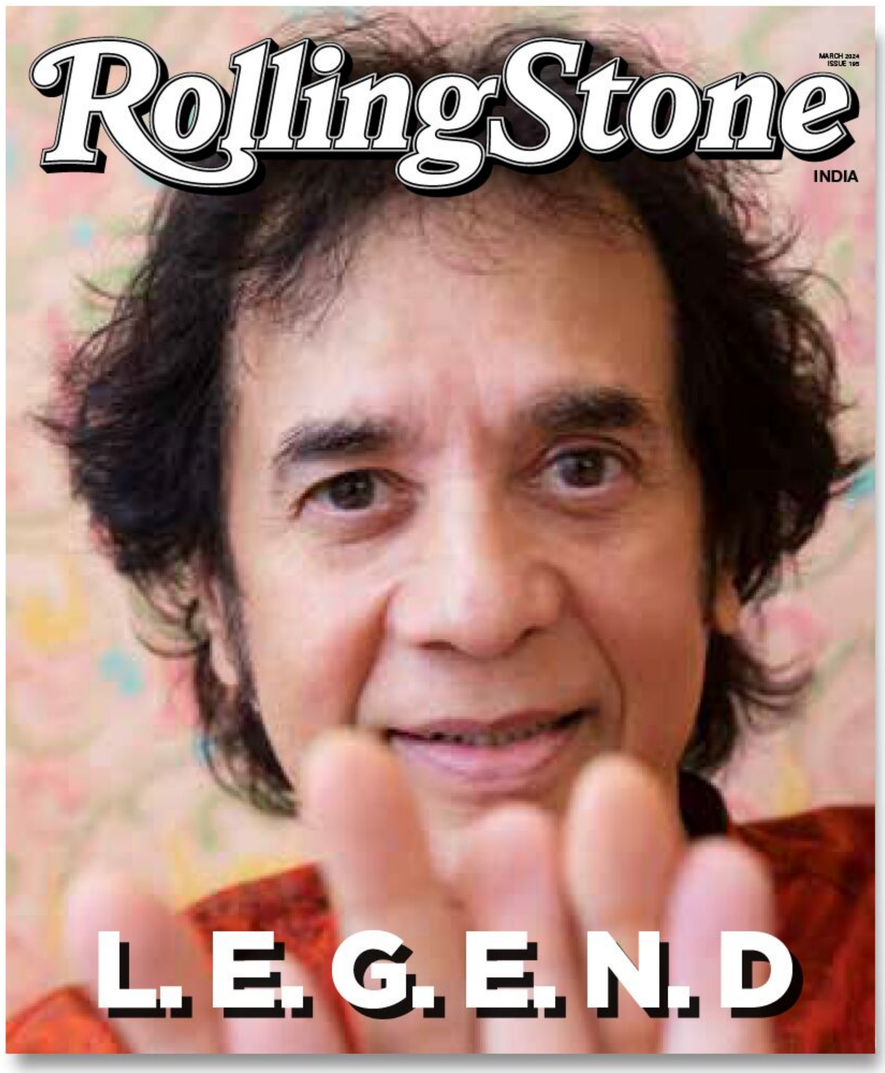
# Correspondence

+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE




**"The cover story on Zakir Hussain beautifully captures the essence of his unparalleled mastery over the tabla."**

— Shubham Trivedi

## Zakir Hussain's Mastery

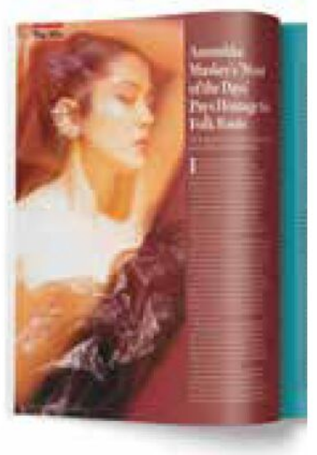
The cover story on Zakir Hussain beautifully captures the essence of his unparalleled mastery over the tabla. Through five mesmerizing movements, it unveils the rhythmic genius of a legend. A profound tribute to Hussain's artistry, it leaves readers enthralled and inspired.

SPOTLIGHT

## New Rock Torchbearers

Long Distances offers a refreshing perspective on the indie rock scene, showcasing the vitality of new talent through their debut EP. With infectious melodies and heartfelt lyrics, the band invigorates the genre, proving that passion and creativity transcend geographical boundaries.

- Dwayne Fernandes



## Anoushka Maskey's Folk Sound

"Most of the Days" by Anoushka Maskey is a poignant tribute to folk roots, weaving evocative melodies with heartfelt lyrics. Maskey's soulful vocals and introspective songwriting resonate deeply, showcasing a profound connection to tradition while embracing contemporary sensibilities. A captivating journey into the heart of musical heritage.

- Achint Maniar

## Rahul Advani's Keeps the Fire Burning

Singer-songwriter Rahul Advani's new song "Fire Burning" bravely delves into the complexities of toxic relationships, offering a raw and introspective exploration. Through poignant lyrics and emotive melodies, Advani sheds light on the turmoil and resilience inherent in such dynamics, creating a powerful and relatable musical narrative.

- Palak Bheda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RollingStoneIndia RollingStoneIn

# the future of music is here

I am thrilled to present *Rolling Stone India*'s debut "Future Of Music" edition. Over the past several months, our dedicated team at RSI has been diligently preparing for this campaign. Through extensive research and consultations with industry experts, we have thoughtfully compiled a roster of 25 emerging and influential artists who are shaping the musical landscape of India. I take particular pride in our selection process, which emphasized diversity, cultural representation, musical genres, linguistic variations, and rising popularity.

As part of this endeavor, the RSI team conducted exclusive interviews with all 25 artists. These conversations delved into various facets of their lives, upcoming projects, the intersection of technology and music, and their visions for the industry's future.

As we unveil this issue, I invite our readers to hop on a journey through the sounds and voices that are shaping the future of music in India. Whether you're a seasoned music enthusiast or a curious newcomer, we are confident you'll discover inspiration and excitement within these pages.

At *Rolling Stone India*, we are dedicated to celebrating and championing the extraordinary talent our country possesses. With this issue, we aim to spotlight emerging artists while paying homage to the established trailblazers who continue to lead the industry forward.

Thank you for joining us today. I trust you'll relish exploring what we've curated for you.

**Peony Hirwani**
Senior Editor

# Rolling Stone

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# The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NU

## Fletcher Almost Lost It All

*Illness brought her rock-star lifestyle to a halt. Now, she's healing in more ways than one*

→

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Jessica Lehrman

## FLETCHER

Cari Fletcher knew something was wrong. After finishing a run of shows in the spring of 2023, she felt deeply run down — and it wasn't just the usual aches and pains of life on the road. The singer, who performs as Fletcher, went to the doctor and learned she had Lyme disease, a bacterial infection that can cause debilitating fatigue and neurological complications. It can also result in inflammation and damage to the nerves in the voice box — meaning Fletcher was faced with the terrifying prospect of being left permanently unable to sing. "There were many, many, many moments over the last year where I was not sure if I was going to return to music," Fletcher, who turned 30 on March 19, says.

By the time she was diagnosed, Fletcher had established herself as one of pop's most versatile stars. She can pen a heartbreak ballad or craft a raucous dance hit. She doesn't shy away from the controversial or the confessional — this is an artist who made music videos for an EP titled *The S(ex) Tapes,* with the ex-girlfriend the EP was about. She can talk spicy ("I just had sex with my ex/In a New York apartment/Ooh, I thought it'd be harmless)" and be the topic of conversation up and down your For You Page. Suddenly, she worried it might all be over.

Fletcher shared her diagnosis on social media and postponed some overseas dates. Marquee letters came down. Comments sections went quiet. Fletcher became a recluse. "I noticed all the other things that got really loud in the time that I got really quiet, and it was the darkness that was in my own mind," she says. "I had to sit with 'Who am I without the applause? Who am I without the analytics and the numbers?' It brought a lot to the surface about self-worth and my beliefs and my gifts and my talents."

Fletcher, who was born in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and raised on Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen, moved back home for treatment, posting up in her childhood bedroom. A typical day for her this past summer started with a hot-girl walk by the soccer fields on which she grew up playing; maybe a bike ride by the inlet; some meditation, some journaling, and a lot of checking in on how her body was feeling.

As she slowly got better, she packed her complicated feelings into an album that comes from Cari, the person, as much as Fletcher, the pop star. *In Search of the Antidote*, out March 22, is an ode to all of the forms of healing Fletcher has gone through in the past 12 months. "My mom would cook us spaghetti and meatballs," she says of being back in Jersey. "We'd go home, have some pasta, and shoot back over to the studio to keep creating."

The artist known for singing about her rock-star lifestyle and heartbreak-numbing libations now has a different focus and aura. The day after the Grammys, Fletcher sits at a booth in a cafe behind the Hollywood Hills sipping a peppermint tea, manifesting a nomination for herself in the future, and reflecting on some of the most vulnerable times in her life. *In Search of the Antidote* is full of raw emotion, teetering between extreme confidence and despair. On the album's scalding, sarcastic opener, Fletcher wonders if she's ruining her own life by lashing out at everything she loves; on the warm, breezy closer, she finds a sense of peace. Crisp ballads and alt-pop-punk "bops" (her words) come in between.

The focus is healing, but it's not all love and light. There's still a healthy dose of mess. On "Doing Better," Fletcher sings about an ex's new girlfriend, who was also the focus of her 2022 hit "Becky's So Hot." The singer kicks off the second verse of the new song with, "Your girlfriend never thanked me/For making her go viral/Fuck it, I'm her idol."

She wrote the album's lead single, "Eras of Us," after running into that same ex (whom she calls "one of my greatest loves") during a stop on Taylor Swift's Eras Tour at MetLife Stadium. It was tough to see someone with whom she had so much history, but she knew a song would almost certainly come from the experience. (Swift, by the way, is a fan, having told Fletcher how much she loved the lyrics of her 2019 hit "Undrunk.")

Fletcher, a champion of sexual fluidity who identifies as part of the LGBTQ community, winces at the idea of labeling her sexuality. "I love women, and women are beautiful, and they've been my muses," she says. "But I have found a lot more freedom in the expansion of releasing the idea that I have to be something all the time.

"If somebody had to put a label on me of queerness … but even that, it's just … I don't know. I just am. I just am…." She trails off. Her tone is mildly exasperated as she looks for the words to describe the energy she feels around those who inspire her songs. So what makes a Fletcher muse? That, the singer is eager to talk about. "I have a lot more muses than people think I do. People think that songs are just about one specific person," she says, with a hint of pride.

Fletcher is still getting treatment for her Lyme disease and leaning on a support system that comprises family and friends — including Miley Cyrus, who Fletcher linked up with when the two performed sultry renditions of "Becky's So Hot" and "Midnight Sky" on Cyrus' New Year's Eve television special. "Her heart is so big, and she just gives so much presence and attention, and listens to you," Fletcher says of Cyrus. "I feel really lucky to have her energy and her presence in my life, and also the ways that she lifted me up."

After our conversation at the cafe, Fletcher pays up front, hugs me goodbye, and walks out the door. Once she's out of earshot, a couple of waiters look her up on Spotify and one plays "Becky's So Hot." In the viral hit, Fletcher sings, "She's the one I should hate/But I wanna know how she tastes." It's a messy girl anthem — the kind of mess Fletcher continues to heal from but hasn't completely shunned just yet.

These days are quieter for Fletcher. She wants to stick around as an artist, to play the long game — one that'd be impossible were she living the life she was in 2022. "My life used to be signing boobs and tequila shots," Fletcher had said as she finished her tea. Still, the chaos isn't gone. Sure, she drinks less and listens to her body more, but …

"I'm still signing tits. That's not changing."

WAISS ARAMESH

### FAST FACTS

**JERSEY GIRL**
Fletcher was born in Asbury Park, N.J. Unshockingly, she loves Bruce Springsteen: "He's molded so much of the way in which I write."

**DRAMA-RAMA**
She once made videos for an EP called *The S(ex) Tapes* with the ex the EP was about.

**TRUE SWIFTIE**
Fletcher is a big Taylor Swift fan. When Swift praised the lyrics to Fletcher's song "Undrunk," she says, "I nearly fainted and passed away at that moment."

HAIR BY CLAYTON HAWKINS AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING DOVE. MAKEUP BY LILLY KEYS AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING BEAUTY PIE. STYLING BY MARC ERAM AT A-FRAME AGENCY. PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE: OUTFIT BY PARIS GEORGIA. BOOTS BY ACNE STUDIOS. BRA: AGENT PROVOCATEUR.

# A.R. Rahman Toasts 'The Unsung' in New Song with Firdaus Orchestra

*The master composer discusses the growth and importance of the all-female ensemble created in Dubai and how the "only way survive is to do new things"*

In an exclusive interview with Rolling Stone India, the legendary A.R. Rahman opens up about the release of "The Unsung," the first of 16 tracks in collaboration with the all-female ensemble Firdaus Orchestra, an initiative of Expo City Dubai. Known for his innovative approach to music, Rahman discusses the inspiration and creative journey behind their latest series, a blend of traditional and contemporary sounds that traverse the themes of humanity, space, and love. Rahman takes us behind the scenes, sharing insights into the process, challenges, and the profound messages woven into each piece.

***Rolling Stone India*: What sparked the creation of your series with the Firdaus Orchestra, and why did you choose them for this venture?**

**A.R. Rahman:** I've been given the privilege to compose for the fabulous Firdaus Orchestra, with its 56 members from 28 nationalities. These musicians have really evolved since we founded them three years back. Throughout the series, each piece is actually trying to bring the artistry of solo musicians and the orchestra.

So the challenge was to see how you can integrate a very orchestral, western kind of a music and also have a hybrid possibility of blending both Arabic, Indian, and western classical. The first piece we're releasing is called "The Unsung."

"Unsung" is actually a tribute to all the people who are behind the scenes doing great things like your parents, your teachers, people who help each other without needing to put a post or Instagram post about it.

It's about celebrating not just our friends but also doctors, nurses, and others we seldom celebrate. That's why they are called unsung and this piece actually kind of celebrates their integrity, the purity and love.

**How did the idea for this project begin, and what was the journey like from concept to completion?**

I started as a film composer and I started composing for commercials, TV commercials and stuff. So my mind was always into, 'What do they want, what are they commissioning me for?' Even though I wanted to do my own music, my own thoughts as a musical piece, it came through the characters of the stories which was given to me.

For the Firdaus Orchestra when they asked me to compose, it was quite difficult to say 'Okay, now I have to find a purpose for this piece, what am I going to do?' These 16 pieces I'm doing for those orchestras all over the place actually. Some of them are very personal, some of them are like tributes like "The Unsung" and some of them are massive symphonic kind of pieces for the mission of space which the East is doing. Some of them are very, very experimental, they don't have a melody, they just have an arpeggio or something akin to a scale.

But because we have the luxury of the Firdaus studio in Expo City Dubai, and the musicians here, I kind of sometimes come and re-record the things, change the range and experiment. It's a beautiful experience, just evolving with time, because some of the pieces from two, three years ago; I'm re-recording them, just to find another kind of a dynamic or tempo change or additional arrangements.

**Could you discuss the unique cultural influences the Firdaus Orchestra added to the project?**

Firdaus is a classical orchestra, as well as a hybrid. They go much further than that, because they are open to new things. The way we created Firdaus was to take the challenges of the modern world. There's so many challenges now. The only way to supersede and survive is to do new things, things which are very passionate, which are very personal, which goes to the depth of artistry, and we have those people here.

**In today's world, how important is it to promote diversity and inclusivity in the music industry, and how does this series contribute to that conversation?**

It's crucial for the vitality and evolution of the music industry to embrace a broad spectrum of voices and experiences. My work with the Firdaus Orchestra illustrates the beauty and innovation that arise from such inclusivity.

The orchestra has become iconic for Dubai, the U.A.E. and for the world because it is a statement to the modern world which is so disconnected and divided and they bring hope, they bring joy, they bring faith in humanity.

It underscores music's role in fostering new perspectives, acceptance, and unity, serving as a powerful example of how music can inspire change and advance conversations about equality and empowerment.

**What do you hope audiences will take away from this series, in terms of both music and cultural message?**

My hope is that this series acts as a bridge, connecting listeners across different cultures through the power of music.

This piece ["The Unsung"] aims to blend various musical traditions to honor their selfless acts, promoting unity and showcasing the true essence of collaboration and silent heroism.

**What role does music play in bridging cultural divides, especially in diverse regions like the Middle East?**

In my journey, I've observed that art, particularly music, holds a profound capacity to either divide or unite. Music, in its essence, transcends boundaries, offering a medium to showcase the rich tapestry of culture to the world. It's a call to action for unity, to appreciate our differences, and to leverage the universal language of music to foster a more interconnected and harmonious world. Through my compositions and collaborations, I've aimed to bridge the gaps, bringing to light the beauty of blending various musical traditions.

**Finally, what future do you envision for global musical collaborations and their impact on the world?**

My vision for the future of global musical collaborations is centered on innovation, unity, and the breaking down of cultural barriers. With the Firdaus Studio, I launched a space for collaboration among musicians across the world. My hope is that we continue to explore new frontiers, fostering a world where music acts as a bridge, connecting us all despite our diverse backgrounds . **PEONY HIRWANI**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

# ‘Showtime’ Series Soundtrack Composer Anand Bhaskar Channels Glitz and Grit

*The Disney+ Hotstar show gets a bit of pop as well as rock influences from the Mumbai artist’s Anand Bhaskar Collective, with singers like Romy, Nakash Aziz, Arjun Bala (from alt act Gumbal) and rapper Pratika*

The latest series on the block, Showtime, is about showbiz and composer Anand Bhaskar was tasked with creating a filmi but modern soundtrack for the Disney+ Hotstar show. Part of the Anand Bhaskar Collective (ABC) and a composer, singer and lyricist for screen (most notably *Mission Mangal*, *Baaghi 2* and Mirzapur, among others), Bhaskar says he dug into rock the way he would with ABC and more filmi pop influences for *Showtime*.

The series director Mihir Desai – who also worked with Bhaskar on *Mirzapur* – brought the composer in for what became their third project together, but it wasn’t business as usual. Bhaskar says, “Even when we’re not working together, we keep sharing music with each other. So when we started working on this,  he said, ‘Let’s do something in the rock space.’” At first, Bhaskar wondered if that meant the Bollywood-esque “watered down” rock music that’s heard in soundtracks, or something “with actual distorted guitar tones and stuff.” It was the latter and that’s how Bhaskar gave songs like “Mahroo” (with singer Romy and lyricist Ginny Diwan) a marked alt-rock that’s rarely heard. He adds, “The moments in the show kind of required the music to kind of lean more towards pop and hip hop, while still retaining some kind of rock attitude.”

He brought in vocalist Arjun Bala (from alt bands like Gumbal and Barty’s Path) to lead songs like the sad pop tune “Bikhre” and lo-fi song “Haara,” singer Nakash Aziz on the Nineties filmi music-driven “Lucky Lover,” regular collaborations like Diwan and Romy (“Mahroo”), plus hip-hop/rock artist Pratika and singer Ramya Kirtana (“Bombae”). “We got a four-piece choir of singers for backing vocals as well,” Bhaskar says.

Among the pieces Bhaskar begins talking about for *Showtime* is “Raghu’s Rage Riff,” a Nine Inch Nails-inspired theme written for the character essayed by actor Emraan Hashmi. “He’s kind of pissed off throughout the show and I just randomly named it and Mihir really liked it,” Bhaskar says with a laugh.

Elsewhere, there’s “Mahika’s Dilemma,” which was written for Mahima Makwana’s character and it appears at the end of the first episode. Bhaskar describes it as a “marriage between electronic, very Glitch Mob-y rhythm with lot of orchestral sort of violins, cello.” He adds, “It brings out the dilemma that Mahima [Makwana]’s character Mahika is facing. She inherits a studio and her life changes overnight. She was the outsider a minute ago and now she has the keys to the biggest studio in the country.”

Pointing out the sonic arc that he put into the show, the composer – along with fellow ABC bandmates and producers Hrishi Giridhar and Ajay Jayanthi – says they kept the first half of the series music to be pop/electronic and the second half “very ABC-inspired.” Bhaskar says, “Mihir [Desai] likes ABC’s music, so second half, we could go full ABC-performing-at-*Coke-Studio*. We completely went apeshit in the second half and we kind of gave it that whole rocky vibe to it.”

While the promotional song “Class” by Badshah, Diesby and featuring Nikhita Gandhi has done its job, the soundtrack has also picked up streams, particularly “Mahroo,” which sees Bhaskar team back up with Diwan and Romy after “Vichhda” from the series *Masoom* and “Vaaroon” from *Mirzapur*. “Before I could even call Ginny for *Showtime*, Mihir called her and said, ‘Listen, we’re doing this show. I’ve already briefed Anand. Now, I’m going to send you the briefs of the song, you start writing.’ It was a no-brainer. There’s a comfort there, working with Ginny,” Bhaskar adds.

Bhaskar has returned to *Mirzapur* as composer on the upcoming third season, rumored to begin streaming in mid-2024. “I’m doing a show called *Paan Parda Zarda*, which is for JioCinema. It’s about the opium trade in Madhya Pradesh. I’m also doing a movie called *Train from Chhapraula*, which is directed by Tisca Chopra and it’s got Radhika Apte, Divyendu [Sharma], Anshuman [Pushkar, from *Jamtara*] and [filmmaker] Anurag Kashyap.”

With Anand Bhaskar Collective, they’ve recently got new management and have finished writing their third album. “Three songs are ready in terms of production, one is fully mixed. Keshav Dhar [producer and guitarist for prog band Skyharbor] was mixing the songs, so we’re still going back and forth on what we need,” Bhaskar says. With a total of eight songs slotted into their next album, Bhaskar says they might just take the singles route. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

# DIVINE and Karan Aujla Light Up the Dharavi DREAM Project in Video For 'Nothing Lasts'

*The track is off their recently released collaborative album 'Street Dreams'*

MUMBAI-BASED The Dharavi DREAM Project (TDDP), heralded as Asia's premier after-school of hip-hop, recently played host to two distinguished guests: rapper DIVINE and Canadian-based multi-talented artist Karan Aujla. The purpose of their visit was to give back to the community, which can also be seen in the recently released music video for their collaboration on "Nothing Lasts," off the seven-track record *Street Dreams*.

The students at TDDP seized the extraordinary opportunity to exhibit their skills before the two artists. Apart from shooting a slick clip, DIVINE and Aujla went a step further by arranging giveaways for the students.

Dolly Rateshwar, Director & Co-Founder of The Dharavi DREAM Project, said in a statement, "We are honored to have Vivian Divine and Karan Aujla visit our project and inspire our young talents. Their generosity and commitment to giving back to the community align perfectly with our mission of empowering under-resourced Talents through hip-hop."

Beyond the realm of music, DIVINE and Aujla collaborated with The Dharavi DREAM Project and Hemkunt Foundation to provide free Langar seva (community kitchen service) to the residents of Dharavi.

The Dharavi DREAM Project stands as a beacon of hope, revolutionizing education by empowering underprivileged youth through the medium of hip-hop. By identifying, nurturing, and showcasing talent from underserved areas, TDDP amplifies voices and cultivates opportunities for growth and success on a global scale.

DAVID BRITTO




COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

# ‘Love Is Not a F—ing Game,’ Kamakshi Khanna Delivers a Poignant Message on Modern Relationships

*The track off the Mumbai-based singer-songwriter’s forthcoming EP*

MUMBAI-BASED singer-songwriter Kamakshi Khanna, known for her introspective and powerful lyrics, has once again delivered quite the offering with her latest single, the striking “Love Is Not A Fucking Game.” This bold and unapologetic track marks the first release from her upcoming second studio EP and serves as a poignant commentary on the complexities of modern romance.

Through “Love Is Not A Fucking Game,” Khanna delves into the pain and frustration of being taken for granted in a relationship. Through raw emotion and unflinching honesty, she confronts the mind games, mixed signals, and power struggles that often accompany the pursuit of love in today’s world. With its biting lyrics and haunting melody, the song resonates deeply with listeners who have experienced similar struggles in their own love lives.

Accompanying the release of the single is a visually stunning music video directed by Vasudha Rungta and animated by Rahul Unadkat and Crispin Cardoz. Through metaphor and symbolism, the video vividly depicts the emotional journey of a woman trapped in a video game, struggling to break free from the manipulative tactics of her partner. As she navigates through levels of increasing intensity, she ultimately comes to the realization that love should never feel like a conquest. With its powerful imagery and thought-provoking narrative, the music video serves as a fitting companion to the song’s themes of empowerment and self-discovery.

Khanna’s collaborators on “Love Is Not A Fucking Game” include Pranay Parti, who produced the track, as well as Karun Kannampilly on drums, Adil Kurwa on bass, and Sounak Saha on guitar. Together, they bring Khanna’s vision to life with their impeccable musicianship and attention to detail.

With her fearless approach to songwriting and her unwavering commitment to authenticity, Khanna has solidified her status as a leading voice in the indie music scene. “Love Is Not A Fucking Game” is not just a song—it’s a declaration of independence, a rallying cry for anyone who has ever felt trapped in a toxic relationship. And with Khanna leading the way, listeners can rest assured that they are in good hands. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

# Cinnamon Cigars Releases Emotionally Charged EP 'Gone...'

*At the heart of the EP lies a thematic exploration of the myriad emotions entwined within the human experience*

NAGPUR SINGER-SONGWRITER duo Cinnamon Cigars comprising musicians Shubham Kundu and Geetika Chatterjee have unveiled their debut four-track EP *Gone...* The pair have crafted an immersive musical experience that delves deep into human emotions. With each track meticulously sculpted to narrate the profound narrative of two individuals navigating through the labyrinth of their feelings.

At the heart of the EP lies a thematic exploration of the myriad emotions entwined within the human experience. From the haunting desire to find solace in an unknown home depicted in "Why" to the resilient pursuit of harmony amidst discord in "Still I Try," each song serves as a poignant vignette capturing the essence of raw human emotions. Through soul-stirring melodies and poignant lyricism, Cinnamon Cigars masterfully encapsulates the universal struggles of love, loss, and self-discovery.

"Baby, we can make this right..." echoes as a rallying cry amidst the tumultuous journey depicted in the EP. The duo portrays the inherent beauty in resilience, depicting the relentless pursuit of redemption and reconciliation amidst adversity. Through introspective lyricism and evocative harmonies, Cinnamon Cigars invite listeners to embark on a transformative journey of self-reflection and growth.

Beyond their musical prowess, the story of Cinnamon Cigars serves as a testament to the power of collaboration and shared passion. Kundu and Chatterjee's journey from individual artists to a cohesive musical force reflects the transformative potential of creative synergy. Fuelled by countless jamming sessions and spirited discussions, their artistic vision has blossomed into the evocative soundscapes that define Gone...

As listeners immerse themselves in the ethereal soundscape of *Gone...*, they are invited to partake in a deeply personal journey of self-discovery and emotional catharsis. Each track serves as a poignant reminder of the inherent beauty in vulnerability. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

# Sai Abhyankkar Plans More Releases and Film Music After 'Katchi Sera' Success

*The Tamil artist's debut release came via Think Indie in January and has since gained over 35 million views*

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST/THINK MUSIC

AMONG THE TOP music videos on YouTube right now, Chennai-based artist Sai Abhyankkar's "Katchi Sera" marks a strong debut release via Think Indie, a branch of the South Indian label Think Music. It also hit the top spot on Global Viral Songs on Spotify earlier this month, currently standing at nearly 18 million streams on the platform.

Coasting on rock-solid dancefloor-friendly and Tamil folk-informed production, "Katchi Sera" has ornate lyrics about longing and making a connection by Adesh Krishna that adds to the relatability factor. Then, there's a slickly shot music video by filmmaker Ken Royson with actor/model Samyuktha Viswanathan as a female lead alongside Abhyankkar, featuring choreography by Anusha Viswanathan.

Abhyankkar – the son of established South Indian singers Harini and Tippu – says in an email interview that the response for "Katchi Sera" has made him feel "ecstatic" and the 19-year-old is grateful for the love and support it's received. The song first took shape during the peak lockdown periods of the pandemic a few years ago, building upon the artist's habit of "creating music grooves every day." He says, "Once the groove was set and the composing work was completed, I brought in my friend Adesh Krishna to write lyrics for this song. Post multiple discussions and edits, we finalized on the quirky lyrics that we hear now. Post this, I approached Think Indie with my song and they approved immediately."

From instrumentalists to dancers to the team involved in making and pushing "Katchi Sera" to the masses, Abhyankkar says there was "great care" in bringing people to the project. The main criteria, according to the artist, was "not only capability and passion but also people with a frequency to give their very best with utmost commitment and take pride in creating the best possible."

With colorful and well-crafted sets for the music video and dance moves that also helped the song grow on social media due to its visual appeal, Abhyankkar recounts that the production standard is set "pretty high" since this was a Think Indie release. He repeats his thanks to everyone involved in the success of the songs.

"Katchi Sera" is his first big release as a composer and Abhyankkar points out that his previous track "Valam Varavendum" was not an "independent composition" but more of a rendition of an existing krithi [composition] by his guru Sriram Parthasarathy.

Now, there's more music in the works, with the sonic direction leaning towards "quirky, raw and musically-rich compositions," according to Abhyankkar. He's already booked for his first international show, performing in London on April 12th, alongside powerhouse vocalist Anthony Daasan and rapper-lyricist Ratty Adhiththan.

Like several artists in the Tamil industry – and perhaps his parents, too – Abhyankkar says it would be a dream to be a composer for film soundtracks if an opportunity came along. He's so far worked as an instrumentalist and producer on some film songs, but composing film songs might just happen soon enough. He says about the rest of his plans for 2024, "With God's grace, I have around six new independent tracks lined up for release. A couple of production houses are in touch for film music as well." **ANURAG TAGAT**

# Swarathma Returns with New Music After Three Years

*The Bengaluru folk-rock band teases their upcoming album with the latest track 'Raushan'*

Bengaluru folk-rock band Swarathma are out with their latest single in the shape of the ethereal "Raushan." The song marks the group's return after a three-year hiatus.

Known for their distinctive fusion of folk and rock influences, Swarathma has captured hearts worldwide with their soul-stirring melodies and evocative storytelling. From their groundbreaking debut in 2009 to their latest offering, the band has consistently pushed the boundaries, earning widespread acclaim and a devoted following in the process.

"Raushan" serves as a captivating glimpse into Swarathma's forthcoming fourth album, promising listeners an exhilarating sonic journey filled with unexpected twists and turns. With its enchanting guitar riffs and hypnotic percussion, the track exudes a sense of liberation and euphoria, inviting listeners to embrace their inner light. The haunting strains of the violin and the impassioned vocals further elevate the song.

Swarathma's Sanjeev Nayak said in a statement, "We crafted the main melody for 'Raushan' during a band retreat in December 2022. Since then, this modest melody has evolved in both musical composition and lyrical substance, blossoming into the song it is today. 'Raushan' explores themes of liberation, freedom, and a sense of lightness."

Beyond their musical contributions, Swarathma has been at the vanguard of cultural innovation, headlining festivals and spearheading groundbreaking projects such as India's first-ever OTT folk music docuseries Equals. The band also recently used the AI tool ChatGPT on stage and in real-time during a live show to write a song which they also performed live. **DAVID BRITTO**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

# Tejas Delivers Sarangi-Infused, Shimmering Pop on New EP 'Museum'

*The Mumbai-based singer-songwriter imbues Indian classical elements into the time-bending four-track record*

MUMBAI-BASED singer-songwriter Tejas' new EP Museum takes a time-warping dive into fantastical stories inspired by works like *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* while also reflecting on life after the passing of his father. Hear the EP exclusively a day ahead of its release below.

Tejas, who has been releasing singles like "Some Kind of Nothing" since his 2021 album *Outlast* and also sang for *The Archies* film with songs like "Sunoh," introduces a new sonic direction on the four-track *Museum* EP, which starts with "Exspiravit In Machina" that includes a voice sample of his father, who passed away in 2021. Sarangi artist Vanraj Shastri shines as Tejas introduces more classical elements, including a smattering of Hindustani vocals on the title track and the bulbul tarang as well.

Tejas says the inclusion of the sarangi came from knowing it was a "beautifully haunting instrument." He adds, "There's something very royal and beautiful about it on a sonic level and I've always admired it from when I was a kid to even hearing it on contemporary albums and even [New Delhi fusion band] Advaita's records. When I was looking to do something darker on the record which became 'The Clock' I knew this was the right instrument for it."

With songs like "The Clock" and "Read Your Mind," familiar elements include Tejas' proclivity for funky, groovy and shimmering pop, now infused with regal synths and more. Produced by Tejas, Jehangir Jehangir, and Adil Kurwa, *Museum* also draws from the Beatles – not just in the way that the artist has always leaned on. Tejas worked on *The Beatles and India* documentary film soundtrack, which came out in 2021 and says it was a "re-education and return to my roots" after a promo tour in Spain. He adds, "There's a reference to 'The End' and definitely an influence from 'The Inner Light' on this EP."

Although only comprising four songs, Tejas notes that it may be the "first in a few editions of this phase of my career." The singer-songwriter says, "I am trying to challenge myself artistically and specifically for this project, question and engage deeper with my own family and identity and see where those answers lead me."

With the sarangi now in the mix, there's a chance of it finding space at his live shows, even if it's just a "special set at some point once the full record is out." The goal is that his shows become a "deeper experience" for listeners, whether through the music, the storytelling or the visuals. *Museum* EP has artwork designed by filmmaker, animator and visual artist Nisha Vasudevan.

To promote the EP, Tejas says a small run of shows is coming up, including a special session at The Apple Store in Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai in May. *Museum* has a lush sound that's further propelled by being specially mixed for Dolby Atmos. "We will be doing some more visualizer/lyric content before we plan for more post monsoons," Tejas adds. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

# Zygnema Take a New Direction on 'Iconic' EP

*The Mumbai metallers draw from Carnatic music and plug in more production elements on their first release since 2020*

For those who know Zygnema's penchant for pummeling grooves, it's certainly different to hear the Mumbai metallers tap into a different rhythmic aesthetic on "Rise Again," the opening track to their new EP *Iconic*.

It starts with Carnatic percussive elements and guitarist Sidharth Kadadi even goes on to rip out a seemingly Carnatic guitar fretwork on the song, supporting vocalist Jimmy Bhore's anguished vocals, drummer Mayank Sharma's fist-tight work behind the kit and monstrous bass grooves that are now executed live by the metal band's latest addition, bassist Somesh Panicker.

The five-track Iconic comes five years after Zygnema's previous single "I Am Nothing" and about nine years after their second album *What Makes Us Human Is Obsolete*. Kadadi says *Iconic* felt like "it was in the works forever." The title track and "Rise Again" were created around 2020. "It was just a rough skeleton structure we started messing around with. Then Covid happened and by the time the world came back to normal, it was already end of 2022. So we started working relentlessly and went all out from the end of 2022 and started work from scratch," the guitarist adds.

There's a polished yet punishing intent on this EP, with more experiments than ever before, like Bhore diving clean vocals for a bridge on "To Reach the Gods," which gets wiry and still piles on complex riffs informed by the likes of Swedish metallers Meshuggah. "Grind" sees the band cut fast and loose in the way they've always been known, but out of nowhere introduces Marathi folk vocals and percussion juxtaposed with math-metal dissonance. There's a playfulness and Indian vocal percussive flair that introduces "Choco Slam," whose title was inspired by the pro wrestling signature move, the choke slam.

Kadadi says, "The breakdown riff in my head still makes me think that it has that huge impact like a choke slam, you know? Like it freaking takes you high up there and slams you real hard. Can't escape or evade the impact from a choke slam."

The idea with a lot of the new sonic elements in play, according to the band, was to try everything that came to mind. There's a grandiose, grisly intent with the title track, one that throws you to the wall with riffs, then introduces *konnakol* vocals and also eerie synths, before Bhore's imposing hook takes over. Kadadi says about being influenced by Carnatic, folk and Indian traditional music, "We are still learning new things and would like to see how far we can go with ideas like this. We all were kind of bored of the same three-piece sound, to be honest. So it just happened naturally while we were composing and working on music. We kept bouncing off ideas and shared our imagination with each other. We literally tried hearing it in everyone's version and then picked whatever sounded the best and more evolved."

Zygnema launch Iconic EP with a gig on home ground on March 24th, as part of their gig series Scarfest. Joined by Pune thrash metallers Kasck and Thane metal act GreyFade, the gig marks the first of two EP launch shows. Kadadi says they have a gig at club venue antiSOCIAL in Pune on April 28th. Fresh off premiering new songs at metal festival Bangalore Open Air in February, Zygnema aren't in a rush as such to tour "vigorously" right away. Kadadi says, "We don't mind playing one or two shows a month for now and slowly pick it up post monsoons." More music videos are being planned and the band will pick back up on "archived tracks" that didn't make it to this EP. "We are working towards finding a niche sound and have like a solid, fresh and new sounding songs to perform live," the guitarist adds. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

2000 - 2008

2008 - 2023

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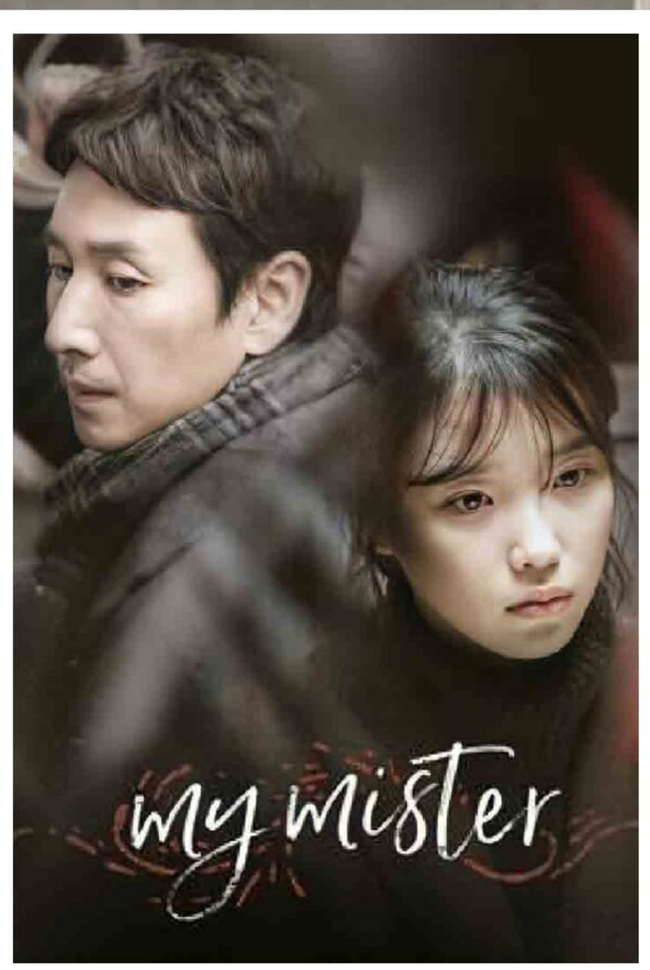
# K-Drama Flashback: 'My Mister'

*'My Mister' digs into the finer details of human connections and the power of empathy, eschewing run-of-the-mill drama or corny storylines*



In its probing of how relationships work and the effects of societal struggles on individuals, *My Mister* (2018) remains an intriguing watch. One whose reflective qualities and maturity extend far beyond the narrative.

At its core, *My Mister* chronicles the lives of three brothers grappling with challenges of their own. The stern and diligent eldest brother, Park Dong-hoon (Lee Sun-kyun), is entangled in a web of interpersonal strife and office politics. Nonetheless, he's still willing to make a decent living for his family and get by in life.

The story unravels as we see Dong-hoon and his siblings' lives entwined with those of Lee Ji-an (IU), 21, who works at the same company as Dong-hoon. She hides a secret that, at the end of the day, connects them both. Her presence lends a sense of mystery and intrigue to the narrative as her past and present come face-to-face. Through poignant moments, surprise turns, and heartfelt interactions, *My Mister* succinctly explores empathy, redemption, and personal growth.

As Park Dong-hoon, Lee Sun-kyun excels, deftly capturing the nuanced aspects of the character. The image he paints of a guy torn between his obligations and his own needs seems extremely plausible. As Lee Ji-an, IU turns into a standout performer, alternating between fragility and resiliency with ease. It's amazing how she portrays a young woman burdened by her experiences and yearning for a sense of belonging.

Other notable characters, including Dong-hoon's eldest brother, Park Sang-hoon (Park Ho-san), and his wife, Kang Yoon-hee (Lee Ji-ah), add multiple dimensions to the story. Sang-hoon's hardships in both his professional and personal pursuits offer a fascinating analogy for Dong-hoon's journey. On the other side, Yoon-hee struggles with her insecurities and the difficulties of being a working mother while having an affair with her husband's younger boss. Their interactions and encounters deepen *My Mister*'s overall complexity.

We meet more characters along the way, each with his or her own agenda and secret that are subtly incorporated into the plot. An ongoing source of emotional depth and intrigue is the tangled one between Dong-hoon and Ji-an, for example. Their relationship, which was built on mutual understanding and similar experiences, changes in ways that go against accepted social mores.

A further veil to the action comes from the engaging dynamics within the "Park" family. The contrasting personalities of the two younger brothers, as well as Dong-hoon and his wife's strained relationship, create a web of familial tension that heightens the drama. It carefully goes over the complex intricacies of family ties, stressing the beneficial and detrimental impacts that love, loyalty, and tolerance may have.

What, in my opinion, distinguishes *My Mister* from other K-dramas the most is its sheer emotional profundity and distinctly authentic portrayal of life's ups and downs. *My Mister* digs into the finer details of human connections and the potency of empathy, eschewing run-of-the-mill drama or corny storylines.

While flawed and complicated, its characters are so likable. Rather than idealizing their circumstances, the drama dwells on their vulnerability, grief, and individual growth. *My Mister* hits home for me on multiple levels, making me feel everything from crushing sorrow to quiet moments of introspection and laying out the overarching ideas of survival and empathy that make up the series.

It encapsulates the essence of being resilient in misfortune, from handling workplace drama and unexpected costs to navigating broken relationships. *My Mister* breaks away from the typical romantic K-drama thanks to its true-to-life narrative and interrelated events. It serves to reinforce what's important in mutual respect and solidarity when facing challenges. The bonds formed between the characters, forged through shared experiences and mutual support, embody resilience that can be harnessed during trying times.

*My Mister* has amazing conceptual depth and delivery. Besides adding to the series' sentimentality as reflected in the relationships and setbacks, they consistently enthrall with their realism. The emotional connection you build with that and all that we see plays a role in *My Mister*'s enduring popularity, cementing its status as a timeless masterpiece of a K-drama. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

COURTESY OF TVN

# X:IN Gets Personal in 'THE REAL'

*Encapsulating their personal stories through the record, X:IN returns with even more powerful sounds and performances*

*THE REAL* holds honest emotions. "Our ways of becoming idols; the way we dealt with difficult times and problems we had," says X:IN's main rapper and lead dancer, Nova, describing the album as a musical expression of "personal stories."

The rising South Korean girl group with homegrown E.Sha, Nizz, Hannah, Russia's Nova, and our very own Aria from India got their start from ESCROW Entertainment, a South Korean record label and entertainment agency.

"X"—in their name—speaks of the unknown, discernible in X:IN and their distinct sound. Their promise was clear right when they embarked on the road of music via *Ready X:IN*, their debut album, released last April. Subsequently, their first mini album, *SYNCHRONICITY* (August 2023), further explored the unknown facets while spanning a range of music and ideas that were in keeping with X:IN's flair.

The band's journey to fame is now revealed in the various sentiments that *THE REAL*, their second mini-album, channels. "I think for this album, we've tried to show X: IN's colors very extensively," says Maknae and main rapper Aria, adding that the creative vision that went into making it was a result of their collective effort above all else. "All of us have pitched in our ideas and suggestions for the making of this whole album."

It essentially has to do with the innermost feelings of X:IN about their ascent to fame. According to E.Sha, the leader, vocalist, and main dancer, the album contains a lot of joy, anger, and sorrow. That's where it all begins: memories, the emotions that accompany them, as well as the rest of the journey. It's music pulsing with the perfect balance of poignant and happy moments.

I see *THE REAL* as an arrangement that digs further into the experiences of each member, tracing their ups and downs, their gradual growth into the individuals they are now, and their relationships with each other.

It includes four songs. "MY IDOL," "NO DOUBT," "WITHDRAW," and "NEVER SORRY." "MY IDOL" is about the pursuit of dreams; "NO DOUBT" shows the members' contradictory personalities; "WITHDRAW" depicts times of hardship but also the process of getting through them for the greater good; and, of course, "NEVER SORRY" introduces X:IN's first ballad. "From the outside, it may just be a story about lovers breaking up, but if you look at it in the context of the album," E.Sha says, "it's our story."

In the end, *THE REAL* is about strength in the face of challenges and jeers and eventually getting to where X:IN is today. Without downplaying the complexity of difficulties, the songs' discussions of grief, denial, self-worth, and ambition have universal appeal. And none more so than the lead single "NO DOUBT," which shows off X:IN's juxtaposition of the mundane and the monstrous, adding to the intriguing "X" factor that makes the band what it is.

**DEBASHREE DUTTA**

COURTESY OF ESCROW ENTERTAINMENT

# THE ESSENCE OF CIX

**CIX WON'T EVER BACK DOWN FROM BEING COMMITTED TO USING MUSIC THAT WILL STIR FEELINGS OF INTIMACY WITH THE LISTENER, RATHER THAN MIMICKING PATTERNS OR ADHERING TO A CERTAIN PREDEFINED CONCEPT**

***By*** **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

CIX WAS ONE OF our 10 Best K-Pop Debuts of 2019. The fourth generation of K-pop, this dynamic boy band of five—BX, SEUNGHUN, BAEJINYOUNG (former member of WANNAONE), YONGHEE, and HYUNSUK—under C9 Entertainment makes and gives sensuous pop music with emotional clarity and topical issues steering their songwriting. Their flashy visuals, infectious energy, and catchy hooks often take center stage, but you love them most for what's within their songs—a full spectrum of feelings—letting one go on an introspective musical journey.

In 2019, CIX debuted with the EP *Hello Chapter 1: Hello, Stranger*. "Complete in X" (CIX) is all its members' uncertainties embraced and rolled into a cohesive unit. Each song in the act's catalog portrays the essence of that entity, spanning a variety of musical genres, from passionate and upbeat tunes to beautiful blues. Additionally apparent in their slick performances is CIX's commitment to honesty and the expression of feelings more directly. "We pay close attention to the emotions used to convey each song, the overall tone, and small details to deliver the message in our music," says HYUNSUK.

That's admirable—CIX won't ever back down from being committed to using music that will stir feelings of intimacy with the listener, a deeper bond, rather than mimicking patterns or adhering to a certain predefined concept. And that's what I like about their songs—the honesty, raw emotions, and all the resonating elements adding to those deft vocal deliveries.

Tracks like "Movie Star" explore the pressures and demands placed on individuals in the spotlight. A contemplative song like "Numb" exposes youth concerns, the young who turn numb, departing what they want and dream of—CIX takes on themes of youth, change, finding oneself, and finding strength in weakness—also vocalizing a mature self in the very meaning of love—and the many feelings accompanying it—joy, anxiety, longing, pain, endurance, and inadequacy.

*0 or 1*, the quintet's brand-new single album, is a frank declaration of the consuming sentiment, featuring tracks that describe "the complex emotions of love." CIX dropped the album in January 2024, eight months after releasing their sixth EP, *OK Episode 2: I'm OK*, the epilogue for the 'OK' series. "*0 or 1* serves as a brief hiatus from our universe story that has been presented until our previous mini-album," says BX. It's distinct without deviating from what distinguishes CIX—deconstructing CIX without losing sight of its essence.

My following interaction with the band crystallizes that—the facets that define CIX, the soul of the band, the songs they're putting out, and how together they're moving ahead in a bid to show what they've got—a lot of which is yet to be shared.

**How did each of you make the transition from being where you were to where you are today?**

**BX:** We have grown and changed a lot through various experiences, but I believe we still have a long way to go. CIX still has a lot to show that hasn't been shared with the world yet. Just like we have evolved in many areas so far, we promise to present different sides in the future.

**SEUNGHUN:** Even though I find myself lacking as a vocalist, I think I have progressed a lot. A vocalist's ability can improve drastically with a tiny difference, so I believe I have been and am going through constant changes by overcoming challenges and improving my skills.

**With a slew of hit studio albums, EPs, and singles to date, I'd like to know some of your favorite songs that best encapsulate the essence of CIX.**

**YONGHEE:** These days, I miss the first albums we released with our debut. Perhaps because those are our oldest albums, all the songs have special memories for me, and I think they carry our essence the best.

**BAEJINYOUNG:** I also think our debut track, "Movie Star," represents our color as a group the most, which is why it is my favorite track.

**Which music video did you like making the most?**

**BX:** Honestly, it is very hard to choose one, as I had fun filming every single music video. It was always enjoyable to work on all music videos while imagining our fans, FIX, feeling happy after watching our work.

**HYUNSUK:** For me, it was "Jungle" because it had the biggest set, which remains in my memory vividly. It was an exciting shoot because I was surprised and mesmerized by every scene we filmed.

**Is your approach to making music changing with the times?**

**SEUNGHUN:** I am not composing actively just yet, but I try to incorporate various genres when I practice writing melodies.

**BAEJINYOUNG:** There would be different approaches based on the changes in time, but most of all, we like to try various challenges so we can present many sides of ourselves in every moment.

**Tell me more about *0 or 1*. The name is interesting, what is the significance of the title?**

**BX:** CIX's first single album, *0 or 1*, serves as a brief hiatus from our universe story that has been presented until our previous mini-album, and it shares new music and charms of CIX. There are 2 tracks in this album, the title track "Lovers or Enemies" and "My Name Is Shadow." As told through these songs' titles, we decided to name this album 0 or 1 to represent the complex emotions of love in the most simple way of dichotomy.

**In terms of the music, the style, the presentation, and most importantly, the message, what does this album represent?**

**HYUNSUK:** It was an interesting experience to film a teaser video with multiple languages generated by AI and to showcase various contents based on androids and humanoids in our concept photos, for instance. Musically, we tried something new such as a dance-pop that involves the use of retro yet stylish instruments. We still were able to carry the group's unique color, so overall we are satisfied with the final result.

**BAEJINYOUNG:** The title track "Lovers or Enemies" shares the simple, direct expression of the most complex emotion, or love, while the B-side track "My Name Is Shadow" narrates about the dedicated love with poetic lyrics and dreamy music. With these two songs, we wanted to convey the unified message of the album.

**I believe the bond between a band and its fans is precious. What are your feelings on this concerning FIX?**

**YONGHEE:** I believe we're maintaining a good relationship by constantly communicating, taking care of each other, and supporting and loving each other.

**HYUNSUK:** I think we have a deep connection because we have spent quite some time together. I consider our bond with fans to be encouraging because we always share many things from our daily lives with each other.

**What has been your most memorable fan moment?**

**BX:** For me, it was when we presented ourselves at our first debut showcase. I think it is especially memorable because I was both nervous and excited at the same time.

**SEUNGHUN:** I remember seeing fans who were waiting for me until the late night or early morning schedules, and I felt sorry and grateful at the same time. I am committed to showing better versions of myself by working harder.

**What is the bigger picture you're looking forward to?**

**BX:** Starting with a concert in Korea, we will soon embark on our international tour. I'm very excited to meet our international fans again, and I cannot wait to show everyone our stage.

**HYUNSUK:** We're about to have a concert and a tour, and I hope we can conclude those successfully.

**How do you feel about the explosive rise of the Korean wave as K-pop idols, and what do you think maintains K-pop's appeal?**

**SEUNGHUN:** I think it is a meaningful and gracious moment because we can share our music with a larger audience. Also, I believe K-pop's charm and popularity lie in its grand performances that provide amazing visuals to enjoy.

**BAEJINYOUNG:** I'm just forever grateful that many people are supporting and loving us! I think K-pop's biggest strength is its diversity in music and charm.

**What distinguishes CIX from your industry peers?**

**YONGHEE:** First of all, we're all on the taller side. Also, each member's charm is very unique, and we can create a fun, new charm together as a group. Last but not least, our music is very good too.

**HYUNSUK:** I think we have a synergy that is completed by the collaboration of each member's charms, and it is something very special and unique.

**Can we see you perform in India anytime soon?**

**BAEJINYOUNG:** We cannot share specific details just yet, but we hope to communicate with our Indian fans in person when a good opportunity arises. Thank you always for loving and supporting us from afar.

**Any message for your Indian fans?**

**BX:** Dear FIX in India, we'll visit you with better performances as soon as possible, so please stay healthy and wait for us just a bit more! Love you.

**SEUNGHUN:** Hi Indian FIX! Whenever we can, we'd love to visit you and perform for you, so please wait a little bit longer! Love you always. ®

PHOTO COURTESY OF C9 ENTERTAINMENT

# EVNNE ON 'UN: SEEN,' THEIR 'SEEN,' AND 'UNSEEN' SIDES

**THE BAND DISCUSSES HOW A SETBACK EARLY IN THEIR CAREER SPURRED THEM ON AND HOW THEY FUSED THOSE EXPERIENCES WITH THEIR SOUND IN THEIR SECOND MINI ALBUM, '*UN: SEEN*'**

***By* DEBASHREE DUTTA**

COURTESY OF JELLYFISH ENTERTAINMENT

EVNNE IS BARELY six months old, having debuted in September 2023, yet their talent is undeniable. The South Korean seven-piece boy group under Jellyfish Entertainment—KEITA, PARK HANBIN, LEE JEONGHYEON, YOO SEUNGEON, JI YUNSEO, MUN JUNGHYUN, and PARK JIHOO—have been commended for their chops on music survival shows, foremost Mnet's *Boys Planet*. Their renditions, as gorgeous as they are, have given them the momentum they've been toiling for. "We bring our exciting energy to the stage, captivating audiences with our infectious vibe," says PARK HANBIN.

Building on that momentum, with elements that are more mature and varied, EVNNE returns with their second mini-album, *Un: SEEN*. It's also their return to prominence since their debut together on their maiden EP, *Target: ME*, showing off their boisterous side. With *Un: SEEN*, however, they reveal the unknown stories that have scarred them from their lives and their journey to debut—the "seen" and "unseen" parts of them.

I like the way the name EVNNE comes off. The agency has it that it comes from a mix of words that mean "Evening's Newest Etoiles," referring to a "new rising star in the night sky." For them, putting something new into each endeavor has become their work language, with composing songs that best convey their thoughts being a priority. "Since our debut, we've been actively involved in album production by writing lyrics, and for this album, KEITA even helped compose the song 'Festa.' As we continue to grow, I hope we can eventually include songs entirely created by our members," says LEE JEONGHYEON.

**"We take dance challenges very seriously and participate in them whenever possible," adds PARK JIHOO, emphasizing that dance remains a key component of their creative strategies and an entertaining narrative device. "Whether it's picking up new dance moves or keeping up with trends, we want to interact with our fans as much as we can through multiple platforms, through diverse content beyond just music."**

The group's origin story is one of inspiration. Last year, *Boys Planet*, had an eclectic cast of competitors, of which nine were selected for Zerobaseone. Later, Jellyfish Entertainment announced that seven of the losing contestants would debut under the agency, culminating in EVNNE. "Looking back," LEE JEONGHYEON says, "we now see that those challenging moments were integral to our growth. Though it was tough at the time, we emerged stronger, with renewed passion and confidence in our dreams."

Hence, failure precipitated their success story. And more of that, as it came to be, is expressed in *Un: SEEN*. In JI YUNSEO's words, "The story of an ugly duckling who was ignored and hurt by others, overcoming adversity, and becoming beautiful as it grows appears to be very similar to EVNNE's story."

**How has life changed for each one of you since joining the band?**

**KEITA:** My start has been a bit different from other members, but upon joining EVNNE, I took on the responsibility of being the leader. I guide the members, support them during times of hardship, and sometimes simply enjoy spending time with them as friends. It is quite a unique experience.

**YOO SEUNGEON:** Except for Keita, we were all aspiring trainees with one goal: our debut. I was presented with a major opportunity to participate in *Boys Planet*. Although I was not able to debut through the show, it led me to a new beginning as a part of EVNNE, and it has greatly changed my mindset. Before my debut, I was primarily feeling desperate, but now I find myself filled with immense gratitude towards the many people, especially our fans, who have given me this chance.

**MUN JUNGHYUN:** From my time on *Boys Planet* to my debut with EVNNE and all the dedication until now, I've truly grown to love performing on stage. During the program, there was a lot of pressure to excel and rank high, but simultaneously, I loved connecting with fans, delivering performances, and sharing memorable moments on stage. Since my debut via EVNNE, I've been fortunate to experience happiness with supportive members and fans.

**What was your initial impression of each other, and how has the camaraderie evolved?**

**PARK HANBIN:** Keita made his debut before joining EVNNE and consistently delivered impressive performances, so we've been admiring his dedication and talent.

**JI YUNSEO:** Some of us were already close friends while practicing together at the same agency, but most of us met through *Boys Planet*. Despite being competitors, we bonded over our shared dreams and goals, which brought us closer than expected. This allowed us to maintain great chemistry even after reuniting as EVNNE members.

**When passion becomes a profession, the excitement hits differently, but getting to this place wasn't a cakewalk. I'd like to hear about the challenges encountered.**

**LEE JEONGHYEON:** Right after *Boys Planet*, we experienced a period of frustration as we were all disappointed with not being able to debut. During this time, we faced many doubts and uncertainties about our future, wondering if it was worth continuing to pursue our dreams and if we would ever get the chance to debut. Fortunately, we were given a chance through EVNNE, which allowed us to rise again from those difficult times. Looking back, we now see that those challenging moments were integral to our growth as EVNNE. Though it was tough at the time, we emerged stronger, with renewed passion and confidence in our dreams.

**JI YUNSEO:** The preparation for this album was reflective, rather than challenging. While our debut album was filled with excitement and anticipation to present our music to our fans, for this album, we thought about how we could showcase a different facet of ourselves. With the themes of "wound" and "growth," we delved into our past experiences and the challenges we've overcome, contemplating our growth

since our debut. It was a time of deep reflection and introspection.

**What drives you most of all?**
**MUN JUNGHYUN:** Our fans, ENNVE, would be our biggest motivation. Whether it's our debut as EVNNE or our recent success with "UGLY" on a music show, all thanks to our fans. Their unwavering support and love drive us to work even harder, and it fuels our desire to repay them by delivering better music and performances.
**PARK JIHOO:** Becoming an "all-rounder group," a goal we've emphasized since our debut, is also a significant source of motivation for us. While our members already excel in a variety of areas, such as vocals, rap, dance, and songwriting, we are eager to grow and evolve into a group where each member shines in every role.

**What distinguishes EVNNE's music?**
**KEITA:** One of the special aspects of our music is the sincerity with which we write and compose our lyrics and create music from our hearts. By actively participating in the album production process, we're able to infuse EVNNE's essence into our music, conveying messages we want to share with our fans and telling stories that are uniquely ours.
**PARK HANBIN:** I believe that EVNNE's distinct and playful atmosphere shines through our music as a distinguishing feature. We bring our exciting energy to the stage, captivating audiences with our infectious vibe. Our performances are all about sharing good times and positive energy with our fans, and we truly relish those moments of connection with ENNVE. This style of music resonates with me because I genuinely enjoy it.

**Is there an emotion or perspective you intend to communicate through your songs?**
**KEITA:** I strive to express the emotions and thoughts that are unique to my perspective in my songs.
**LEE JEONGHYEON:** Just like the track "K.O" from this album, I work hard to encapsulate my strong will to persist despite limitations, pushing forward relentlessly to overcome obstacles.
**YOO SEUNGEON:** To me, singing in front of an audience is about sharing my story through melody. Before performing a song, I always interpret it in my way, contemplating how to best express its essence, striving to be a compelling storyteller. I hope that my music brings joy and solace to those who listen.
**JI YUNSEO:** I think the content of our songs often varies based on the theme we're exploring. Nevertheless, we consistently aim to encapsulate the story we want to share in each track. Through our music, we convey our humble yet unwavering ambition and determination to move forward, along with our hope to have fun with our listeners.

**What differentiates *Un: SEEN* from *Target: ME*?**
**PARK HANBIN:** Two albums might seem similar since they both have the umbrella concept of 'troublemakers,' but the main difference lies in what we try to showcase through that concept in each album. In our debut album, *Target: ME*, we showcased a more exciting and energetic side of troublemakers, representing the beginning of EVNNE. In our second album *Un: SEEN*, we wanted to prove how much we have grown. Therefore, we prioritized showcasing an even more powerful side of us as well as our hidden inner side and sentimental vibes.
**JI YUNSEO:** One of the keywords for this album is 'Ugly Duckling.' The story of an ugly duckling who was ignored and hurt by others, overcoming adversity, and becoming beautiful as it grows appears to be very similar to EVNNE's story. For this album, we wanted to focus on sharing what all members have gone through and the grown and improved version of EVNNE after accepting the hardships we suffered.

**What is the song count of *Un: SEEN*?**
**YOO SEUNGEON:** Firstly, the title track "UGLY" is a blend of tech house with strong beats and groovy R&B and expresses EVNNE's rascal-like energy powerfully. It is our delightful interpretation of the negative connotation of 'ugly,' spreading the message of "Let's accept ourselves even when we're ignored and ashamed."
**JI YUNSEO:** For "SYRUP," KEITA, LEE JEONGHYEON, and I participated in writing the lyrics. It will attract the listers to fall into our charms, just like one cannot resist the sweetness of syrup! Through the exciting vibe of the song and charming lyrics, you'll be able to learn more about EVNNE members' charms!
**MUN JUNGHYUN:** "K.O. (Keep On)" is a track with speedy drums and enegetic synth theme, and it carries EVNNE's determination to 'Keep On', not being defeated by 'Knockout.'
**LEE JEONGHYEON:** "Chase" talks about a will to chase an illusion even though one can never catch it, and it's a dreamy song that is quite different from other songs on *Un: SEEN* so it portrays EVNNE's charms in a new direction. Also, KEITA and SEUNGEON participated in writing the lyrics for this track!
**KEITA:** I participated in composing and writing the lyrics for "Festa," and my inspiration was the emotions I felt during our fan meeting when we were having fun and enjoying the stage with our fans. As I made a comparison of my emotions back then to a bright, grand festival, I hope ENNVE can also reminisce about our memories and raise anticipation for the future memories we'll create together!

**Which song off the album is your favorite?**
**KEITA:** I think I have a stronger attachment to "Festa" because I played a part in its creation. As I mentioned before, it started with a memory of our members and fans having fun together, and it also inspires me to look forward to more memories we'll make together!
**PARK HANBIN:** I would choose "K.O." as my favorite because we were able to share a new, fresh side of us with this track. While we presented a powerful and exciting side of us through the title track, "K.O." shows a completely different side from that.
**LEE JEONGHYEON:** The main concept of "SYRUP," which I participated in writing the lyrics for, was to compare EVNNE's charms to irresistible syrup. To bring that idea to life, I considered a lot about what our charms are and how to express those charms to let even the new listeners know, 'This is EVNNE' while working on the lyrics. That is why "SYRUP" is my favorite track.
**YOO SEUNGEON:** I like "Chase" because I think it fits me well, and I contributed to the lyrics. When I first heard the track, I thought it embodied EVNNE's charm in the best way that I could express it, so I thoroughly enjoyed working on this song.
**JI YUNSEO:** I pick "Festa" as my favorite because it pictures us having fun on the stage. I believe all members shine the most on the stage, so I like "Festa" which captures that moment.
**MUN JUNGHYUN:** I would pick "Chase" as my favorite. It carries a similar vibe to "Pretty Thing," which is my favorite track from *Target: ME*. Also, it is quite different from the powerful charm we usually show on stage, so I think it represents our unique, different charm well.
**PARK JIHOO:** My favorite is "Festa." KEITA depicted the atmosphere of us having fun very well, together with our fans, while performing.

**Music undoubtedly brings you guys together—any other common interests?**
**LEE JEONGHYEON:** We all enjoy working out or playing sports, so when we have the opportunity, we like to get together and work out. Also, some members have common hobbies, such as reading books or playing games, which may not be the group's common interests.
**PARK JIHOO:** I think we're all quite serious with short form videos these days. We enjoy searching and following trends or new challenges and uploading those for our fans!

**What activities does EVNNE do in their spare time?**
**KEITA:** I usually catch up on sleep!
**PARK HANBIN:** I like to clear my mind by reading books or taking a walk along the Han River.
**LEE JEONGHYEON:** I usually spend my time with members playing games or discovering new music and movies.
**YOO SEUNGEON:** I enjoy live singing performances and working out!
**JI YUNSEO:** I like to spend time working out or playing games.
**MUN JUNGHYUN:** Just like HANBIN, I also enjoy reading books. I like watching dramas too!
**Park JIHOO:** I enjoy sports, particularly basketball. I'm also into fashion, so I enjoy looking for new clothes!

**Is there something that you truly wish comes about this year for the band?**
**KEITA:** My goal this year and beyond is to meet more ENNVEs and present them with better music. My dream would be to keep performing in front of my fans while showcasing a variety of appealing qualities and musical styles.
**YOO SEUNGEON:** To be honest, our number one goal this year was to win first place in a music show, which we were able to do thanks to ENNVE as the new year began. So, we're now aiming for the next goal on our list: getting on the Billboard chart!
**MUN JUNGHYUN:** We just kicked off our first tour '2023 EVNNE FAN-CONCERT [SQUAD: R] ASIA TOUR.' I look forward to visiting many places and enjoying the stage with ENNVEs there, and I hope we can wrap up the tour successfully in good health!

**What do you want others to know about EVNNE, especially those who may not know you yet?**
**EVNNE:** We've been saying this since our debut: We want to show everyone that we're a versatile group. We hope that EVNNE will be known as a group of talented individuals who excel in a variety of fields, including music and variety shows. We'll work hard to show that we can handle a wide range of concepts, styles, and musical genres, as well as have a variety of charms to share through variety shows and our content, so please keep an eye out for EVNNE's future endeavors. Thank you!

# VISHAL MISHRA

# ON 'PEHLE BHI MAIN', NEW MUSIC AND WORKING WITH ATIF ASLAM

**ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S LEADING HITMAKERS RIGHT NOW, MISHRA SAYS HE'D SIMPLY LIKE TO BE KNOWN AS A MUSICIAN INSTEAD OF SINGER, COMPOSER OR ANY SPECIFIC COMBINATION**

***By*** **Anurag Tagat**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

It was in 2016 that Vishal Mishra made his singing debut on "Shaam O Seher," off the Lalit Pandit-composed soundtrack for a little-known Bollywood movie called *Shorgul*. In the initial years, however, Mishra was known more as a composer and a producer before he blossomed fully as the emotive voice that led songs like "Kaise Hua" from *Kabir Singh*.

Apart from being prolific in the movie soundtrack space, Mishra is often the voice behind tearjerker heartbreak songs as a solo artist, creating songs like "Aaj Bhi," "Kya Kar Diya" and "Woh Chaand Kahan Se Laogi," among others. "Naacho Naacho" from the movie *RRR* – the Hindi version of the Oscar-winning Telugu song "Naatu Naatu" – was also sung by Mishra with composer M.M. Keeravani. The end of 2023 and start of 2024 saw "Door Aa Gaye" featuring rapper Dino James and "Ek Mulaqaat," with composer duo Javed-Mohsin, co-singer Shreya Ghoshal and lyricist Rashmi Virag.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Mishra talks about his journey in the Indian music industry so far, working with the likes of Atif Aslam for songs like "Jaane De" and working on "Pehle Bhi Main" from the movie Animal. Excerpts:

***Rolling Stone India*: Your first break in the Indian film music industry was more as a composer, is that correct to say? But all along, I'm guessing you always wanted to be known as both, a singer and composer?**

**Vishal Mishra:** Yes, you can say that my first break was as a composer in the industry. But officially if you see, I sang for a film called *Shorgul*, I sang the song ["Shaam O Seher"] for Lalit Pandit ji who I used to assist back in the day. Officially, that was my first break.

I always wanted to make music. I have always seen music as emotions that I can see and feel and when I mix that feeling with my own experience and expression, I think it becomes individual. That gives me the most surreal feeling that an individual can achieve. I hope and pray that every artist gets that feeling.

My first love will always be creating music because my voice is a tool that I use to express it. So they are interconnected in a way. I think I would love to be known as a musician rather than one category of the job like I shouldn't be known just as a music director or a composer or a singer. I have a problem with that, because I feel we describe a musician too much. It should just be a musician, I guess.

**One of the combos that really worked well was with Atif Aslam, like "Jaane De" and "Selfish". How do you look back on those projects and working with him? Are you still in touch?**

Oh yes, me and Atif, we talk sometimes. We wish really good to each other and we are really fond of each other. I'm fond of his art and for him as an individual. And he's fond of me as an individual and my art and we have a ton of love and respect for each other. 'Jaane De' is one of those songs – he sang for me one or two other times also, like in *Race* – that's very special to me. That's the only song I did with Irrfan saab [Khan, actor, for the Bollywood movie *Qarib Qarib Singlle* in 2017]

Me and the writer Raj Shekhar were very close to him [Irrfan] and he had a very integral part to play while we were creating the song and he was really involved. We wanted to make a song that is for people to heal. That has always been my intention to add on to somebody's journey. If I can heal, if people get healed by a piece of music that I make, I think it's the most beautiful feeling. I think 'Jaane De' is that healer. That one with Atif will always be very special.

**Some of your solo pop releases often have heartbreak and this emotional intensity. Do you feel you are like that as a person as well?**

I think it's about being honest to what you feel at that point of time, when I make independent songs that are free from the film world. I try and write what I'm feeling at that point of time, whoever I meet, people have a huge impact on me and I come from a certain background, which is, which I feel is, is right there at the core. I just saw this. I grew up on this kind of music and people were just those who needed music as a companion.

Sometimes, when I'm making pop songs, I want to make songs that feel like a companion. What do you need a companion for? To say your heart out. So I just say things that I feel people are feeling and I am feeling and I mix it with my experience.

**To ask a larger question, why is it that you feel you write sadder, sometimes angsty love songs the best?**

I feel it's the most beautiful emotion to love. I'm full of love, so that's why I'm writing songs about how love works, how the journey of love is; You start with a lot of happiness and suddenly, I feel all promises come to an end. I write about that.

So if you look at the songs I've released, I talk about the whole spectrum – I'll make a song like 'Sajna Ve'

[with Lisa Mishra] but also 'Manjha.' I'll also make a song like 'Aaj Bhi' as well as 'Tu Bhi Sataya Jayega.'

Even film music, it's about what I feel it will resonate and how I'm producing the song and how inspired I am by the script and by the director. I hope that whatever I'm writing people are liking. [*laughs*]

**You worked on "Door Aa Gaye" with Dino James. What was that experience like and are there more Indian hip-hop artists you want to work with?**

See, I don't define music by genres and I don't think that there are any boundaries to any kind of collaboration, for that matter. 'Door Aa Gaye' was an idea I had. I really connect with Dino, because I feel we are similar in the way we have... our backgrounds and the way we conduct our lives. We connected on that note.

This beat was there with me. I wanted to write a hip-hop... it's not actually hip-hop, but more hip-pop. I wanted to write a song which is on a hip-hop beat. I have this side too, that's why I think I'll name my album coming soon on these lines only!

I started cyphering the chorus on this beat and Dino heard the beat and we connected. In the future also [I would collaborate with different artists]. *Naam hi sangeet hai, sang mein hone wala geet* (In the name sangeet, there is music that is made in unison), if you break it down. That is what keeps you growing musically, You have to have people who can put in their elements and make your energy bigger and better. I'm looking forward to collaborating with everybody out there.

**One of your biggest projects in 2023 was "Pehle Bhi Main" from Animal. How was it working on that?**

Although so many of my songs have released in 2023, but *Animal* is special for how the film is doing and how people are loving the music. There's a nostalgic element too, because I worked with [director] Sandeep Reddy Vanga after making 'Kaise Hua' and 'Pehla Pyaar' in *Kabir Singh*, I think there is an energy we share that is unlike any other. Every time we have friction of creativity, I think it always translates into something unorthodox and beautiful.

**What else is coming up through 2024?**

2024 is a massive, massive year. I have so many different kinds of music coming out. I have 'Aaj Bhi 2' coming out. I have a lot of films coming out, I don't know if I can take names or not. This time I have a lot of solo albums coming out that I own completely musically and feeling that responsibility and I'm feeling that energy. I'm looking forward to concentrate more on music, learn more, add more to people's journey and it's going to be a super exciting year. ®

# JESUS, TAKE THE DIAL

**Why is the radio so full of Christian rock? You can largely thank the Educational Media Foundation, the little-known nonprofit taking the devil's music off the air**

## BY KATIE THORNTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GUILLEM CASASÚS

ON THE AIR

LOOKING OUT THE studio window of the radio station where she'd worked for 29 years, DJ "Mistress Carrie" Sarao could see a crowd gathering outside. It was a Friday night, Feb. 21, 2020, and freezing, but that didn't stop hundreds of Bostonians from flooding the parking lot when they heard the news. There was no invitation, just an impulse, an impromptu meetup of loved ones known and unknown. At midnight, the city would lose its last rock radio station.

Debuting in 1970, WAAF helped launched the careers of local bands like Aerosmith and Godsmack, and put national groups like Shinedown on the map. To many listeners, the station was as much a part of Boston as Fenway Park and clam chowder. WAAF was, Mistress Carrie's longtime colleague and fellow WAAF DJ Mike Hsu told me, a "local Massachusetts club of troublemakers and assholes." At big rock concerts, chants of "'AAF! 'AAF!" were as common as feedback. Sometimes WAAF loyalists would come to blows with devotees of their onetime competitor — rock station WBCN — before the latter went off the air in 2009. For Mistress Carrie, a 51-year-old, purple-haired rock evangelist, WAAF was the soundtrack to her adolescence, as it had been for so many other Bostonians.

In the days leading up to the end, the mood at WAAF was somewhere between hospice care and a rowdy Irish Catholic wake. Old friends flooded in; listeners called with high-octane send-offs; Aerosmith's Tom Hamilton stopped by to pay tribute. But as the clock ticked toward midnight, there was a quiet in the on-air studio. Mistress Carrie's voice broke as she told her listeners to keep their heads high, shoulders back, and horns up. "We're goin' out proud," she said. "Because we were all part of something special."

"It was awesome," Hsu replied solemnly.

Six minutes before midnight, Mistress Carrie and Hsu taunted the soon-to-be owners of their beloved station.

"There's only one way to go," Mistress Carrie said.

"Loud," Hsu stated.

"In your face," replied Mistress Carrie.

"Evil," Hsu declared authoritatively.

Crackling in the background was the soft but ominous sound of rain falling and church bells ringing — the iconic opening of Black Sabbath's 1970 track "Black Sabbath." The song was "handcrafted, especially chosen" for "the segue into the new format," according to Hsu — intended, Mistress Carrie told me, to "inject as much satanism in the airwaves as possible before we flipped the switch."

"Wherever you are," Mistress Carrie implored her listeners, her voice breaking, "roll your windows down!"

"Crank it up!" yelled Hsu.

"One last time, baby!" Mistress Carrie spat out, before screaming a chant that had rung through Boston's rock scene for half a century.

"'AAF! 'AAF!" she yelled, with Hsu joining in. About 150 current and former employees, crammed into the adjacent office space, opened the door to join in. Their chanting voices filled the airwaves. "'AAF! 'AAF!" With their final song growing louder, the DJs faded out the mics and closed the studio door. "And [we] sat there with our headphones on," Mistress Carrie says, "and cried."

Perfectly timed by Hsu and Mistress Carrie, the song ended at midnight, when an engineer came in and flipped a switch, ending WAAF's transmission once and for all. In the studio, all was silent save for the tears of Mistress Carrie and Hsu.

Listeners, though, heard something else: the impersonal dawning of a new era. There was no flashy sign-on, no new local DJ to take the reins as the frequency changed hands. The new owners couldn't be bothered to tip their hat to their new Boston audience with a shout-out or a song by a local artist. Instead, they just punched into their automated playlist, which emanates via satellite to hundreds of radio stations across the country, fading in midsong. With the signature clean production and contemplative, easy pace of Christian rock, artist Jeremy Camp's 2006 track "Let It Fade" invited listeners to be saved, to find new life. WAAF had just become the latest casualty in a string of radio stations all over the country, all lost to a massive but little-known nonprofit called the Educational Media Foundation.

If you've ever wondered why it seems like every other station on your dial is Christian rock, EMF is a big part of your answer. From its headquarters in a Nashville suburb (the organization is slowly relocating from its longtime home of California), EMF plays the generic sounds of contemporary Christian music, or "CCM." It is a genre that everyone from artists and critics to church leaders have decried as being somewhere between "the absolute worst" and "doctrinally unsound." But the Educational Media Foundation has quietly become the country's fastest-growing radio chain and second-largest station owner in the country, bested only by iHeartRadio. With hundreds of cookie-cutter stations branded as "K-LOVE," as well as its smaller chain of "Air1" stations, EMF broadcasts on more than 1,000 signals across all 50 states and some U.S. territories, reaching an estimated 18 million listeners a week.

On the surface, EMF's broadcasts are glaringly apolitical. They opt instead for their trite brand of Christian rock, all teed off by the same, small cast of nationally syndicated, Anywhere-USA DJs who smile through everything from squeaky-clean jokes about the drink sizes at Starbucks to prayers asking God to watch over those who have donated to the organization. But behind its politically neutral facade, the organization — and the CCM industry more broadly — appears to be an inherently conservative project. Many right-wing Christian culture bearers have long believed in the "Breitbart Doctrine" — the idea that, to change politics, you must first change culture — and have fought for decades to build a parallel popular culture free of sharp edges, hard questions, or representations of lives that veer from the straight and narrow. The world of CCM, in turn, "reflects the values of the religious right," says religious-studies historian Leah Payne, by providing "suburban families with safe Christian listening experiences in the car." And while EMF stations may not have the "attention-getting, rage-inducing content" of an explicitly political outlet like Fox News, she says, "K-LOVE is the softer side of that conservatism."

Today, the organization's nationwide network of radio stations plays mostly white, male artists. Though it professes to broadcast "Christian music," it largely steers clear of genres like religious rap or gospel, as well as any Christian rock that grapples too heavily with doubt or hardship. Christian artists who have wavered in their faith have quietly been dropped from EMF's playlists; several queer Christian artists have lost work and airtime on CCM radio after coming out. (Through a representative, EMF declined to be interviewed for this story and did not respond to requests for comment.)

But EMF's story isn't just about bad music taking over the airwaves in service of a cultural vision that is overwhelmingly white, straight, and artistically regressive. It's also the story of the near-demise of local radio — a longtime haven for new music, artistic outcasts, and political dialogue — at the hands of a tax-avoiding not-for-profit organization that appears to operate like a very-much-for-profit media mega-corporation. For decades, EMF has hidden behind a veneer of uncoolness while honing a signature technique: At big commercial stations and small, beloved community-radio stations alike, they've offered the owners an undeniable sum of money, wiped out the local presence, and replaced it with unmanned transmitters. Almost every new EMF station operates as a repeater with no local voices, few local jobs, and barely any overhead.

**While EMF stations may not have the "rage-inducing content" of an outlet like Fox News, says historian Leah Payne, they are "the softer side of that conservatism."**

As of 2022, the little-known organization had just shy of a billion dollars in net assets (a number that grows steadily year after year), with an annual revenue of nearly a quarter billion. (National Public Radio, by comparison, had net assets of less than $150 million, and operated near the break-even mark.) In 2021, EMF's then-CEO Bill Reeves made a cool $770,000 a year — well over what NPR's CEO made that year. (Compensation data for EMF's current CEO, Todd Woods, has yet to be released.) And listeners are the primary ones paying that salary: Ninety-seven cents of every dollar the organization makes comes directly from listeners' pockets. EMF's on-air hosts repeatedly hound their sometimes hard-up listeners for money, often several times in an hour. With few operating costs, each new station quickly becomes a vehicle for new donations. While other radio companies sell off signals and struggle to keep advertisers, nonprofit EMF has built an unassuming money-making machine.

In the WAAF studio that last fateful night, some staff were feeling whiplash. Just three years earlier, Hsu watched as the station he grew up with, Brown University's WBRU in Providence, Rhode Island, was choked off the air in an EMF buyout. WAAF program director Joe Calgaro, sitting next to Hsu, had his longtime dream of working at his hometown rock station — the Loop, in Chicago — pulled out from under him when EMF bought it in 2018 for $21.5 million. In the case of Boston's WAAF, the organization paid more than $10 million for the signal.

Instead of new rock bands and a few classic standbys, listeners in the Boston area can now hear a small and frustratingly catchy playlist of guitar-driven worship songs, interspersed with promotions for EMF apps that allow you to listen everywhere — "even the Chili's parking lot!"

"They might not ever say it out loud," says Mistress Carrie, "but you can't tell me there isn't a little bit of pride that K-LOVE is taking the devil's music off the radio and buying rock stations out."

According to an interview with recent CEO Reeves on a Christian-radio website, EMF's "signal expansion" team sits down together every 10 days to continue plotting its growth. The group of engineers, executives, and money guys look at stations that might be vulnerable to a buyout, and hatch plans. And EMF built its kingdom by expertly exploiting loopholes that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) put in place to help small nonprofits and try to keep the broadcast spectrum from falling to those with the deepest pockets. In 2018, former EMF CEO Mike Novak told a radio-industry magazine that "in my own heart, I know God was involved" in the decision to form a 501(c)(3), "because being a not-for-profit has paid off for us many, many times."

To Mistress Carrie, it didn't feel fair. When it comes to music radio, she says, "they're playing on a completely separate set of rules than everybody else."

**IN 1978, BOB** Anthony Fogal was working his dream job as a DJ at KFRC, a San Francisco rock and Top 40 station that had been named *Billboard*'s Station of the Year four times in a row. But Fogal, 28 years old with a bright smile, iconically Seventies big-frame glasses, and a slightly shaggy beard, was also a recent convert to evangelical Christianity — and he was feeling unexpectedly unfulfilled. Sitting in his office, he scrawled an idea on a yellow pad of paper: "Christian KFRC?!" At the time, a lot of Christian radio was still fringe: sharp-tongued preachers from small-town churches prophesying about the end times. And while Fogal may have personally embraced this kind of religiosity, he had something else in mind for his radio station. He wanted to reach the masses. "No Christian-ese," he wrote on the paper with a bold underline.

Two years later, Fogal went public with his effort, forming the nonprofit that would soon be known as the Educational Media Foundation. They ran ads in the local paper with open invitations for anyone wishing to discuss the creation of a new Christian-music radio station. They held early-morning prayer gatherings and film screenings, raising money by charging $5 a head. It wasn't easy, but it was his calling: Fogal, who had been living a plush life in Marin County, would come to sell many of his belongings to make his vision come to life.

By 1982, Fogal and his followers had scraped together enough to buy an FM station that had belonged to a bankrupt church in Santa Rosa, California. On the Educational Media Foundation's flagship station, Fogal bucked Christian-radio convention by almost exclusively playing music — all optimistic and Jesus-tinged. Though leaders of local churches scoffed, some audience members were so moved that they wanted to do more than listen. Volunteers put on concerts, created a newsletter, held an annual auction, helped solicit donations, and rallied listeners to pray for more frequencies.

Their prayers were answered by Army-disciplined pop-radio DJ Dick Jenkins, who came in as general manager in 1986. Jenkins rebranded the flagship station and began using the slogan "Positive and Encouraging: K-LOVE" — which the organization still uses today. It started negotiating buyouts — often with small, struggling Christian radio stations. New stations rebroadcasting K-LOVE sprung up around Northern California, and eventually in some small towns and midsize cities throughout the country. With Jenkins at the helm, EMF's chain of near-identical stations grew steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

As the company built its broadcast network, one business decision proved to be peculiarly prescient: the choice to incorporate as a "not-for-profit" entity. Not only did that status let it avoid paying tax, it also gave EMF several legs up in the radio world. It allowed the organization to take advantage of long-held FCC policies intended to keep the radio dial from being sold to the highest bidder, such as waiving application costs and other fees for nonprofits due to their inherently "limited funding." EMF also made use of a federal policy that let new nonprofit stations opt out of the requirement of having a local broadcast studio. Furthermore, EMF could legally get donations from listeners — a revenue stream commercial stations don't have at their disposal. For EMF, "it was just a matter of expansion," says Todd Urick, a radio engineer and community-radio advocate in Los Angeles County. By the early 2000s, the nonprofit had well over 50 radio stations and was bringing in around $25 million in donations annually.

In 2003, EMF leveled up again. That spring, the FCC set aside a week in which radio organizations could apply for radio "translators" — in essence, small repeater stations that rebroadcast a parent station into an area that the original signal couldn't reach. Translators are a fraction of the price of new stations, and were easily available to nonprofit broadcasters like colleges, public radio stations, and community and religious broadcasters. After that March week in 2003, Urick was sifting through the FCC's digital database to see who had applied. "EMF," he says, "was a major filer of these translators." In fact, the organization had applied for nearly 900 translator stations across the country, including coveted signals in big cities. They'd get approved for more than 250. With an explosion of new translators broadcasting Christian music, EMF soared: By 2006, the nonprofit more than quadrupled its assets, to more than $80 million; by the end of that year, EMF was the world's largest broadcaster of contemporary Christian music.

But perhaps most disturbing of all is that, from the beginning, EMF's nonprofit status has let it access a gold mine of frequencies: the storied "left of the dial." The FCC has long reserved the lower FM band — from 88.1 to 91.9 — for exclusive use by groups including colleges, community and public-radio organizations, and tribes. It's the stuff of subcultural legend, and the inspiration for the Replacements' 1985 ode to college radio, "Left of the Dial." With big, commercial entities banned from bidding on these signals, the FCC imagined that small nonprofits could access them. But with a giant like EMF still entitled to these frequencies, small organizations have found it hard to compete: In 2015, listeners and staff at a classical public-radio station in South Florida couldn't raise enough to buy back their frequency after it was sold to EMF. In 2017, not even a media-savvy campaign led by current and former Brown University radio staffers could keep the frequency out of EMF's hands. And in 2018, EMF bought Shaw University's signal, which had been the first public-radio station owned by an HBCU; the more than 2,000 signatures on Change.org weren't even a hiccup. Even as EMF grew into a giant, it still reaped the benefits designed to give small nonprofits a fighting chance on the radio dial.

If you ask Urick, EMF has also been a behind-the-scenes bully. He says he has "run into several cases" where EMF has made small engineering changes that have "practically no effect" on EMF's reach, but limit a nearby community broadcaster's coverage — or keep an organization that was hoping to get a new station from getting on the air. Like in 2013, when the nonprofit punk fanzine *Razorcake* applied for a tiny Los Angeles-area FM station on the same signal as an EMF translator down in Orange County, and EMF barraged it with complaints about potential interference. "It was kind of like the NFL going after a peewee team," says zine editor Todd Taylor. "They were just trying to bury us in paperwork." (Full disclosure: I was interviewed by *Razorcake* last year and worked in community radio many years ago.) Urick also says that, over the years, he has watched EMF buy up multiple translators in the same city — doubling, sometimes tripling up their coverage. "They hoard [signals] where they don't even need them, where they're extremely redundant." And that, Urick says, takes away potential signals from community-radio hopefuls.

In cities and small towns alike, EMF moves in like a ghost — almost imperceptible but ever-present — with virtually no local staff or local facilities, without paying the fees required of commercial radio companies, and on frequencies unavailable to the commercial networks that are, increasingly, its competitors. But when asked in 2022 about EMF's localism — or lack thereof — by Christian website HisAir.net, then-EMF CEO Reeves put it in holy context:

"Well, the answer is pretty simple. That's just not what we are called to do at this time."

**FROM HER SEAT** behind the microphone at WAAF in the 2010s, Mistress Carrie saw EMF's K-LOVE and Air1 stations spreading to more and more frequencies. But she never saw them as a threat: "I've always said it's my opinion that the devil writes better music than God." Christian rock, she says, "was more of a punchline" for her and her colleagues.

But in the CCM industry, getting that immediately recognizable sound — however derided — has been a science. "You just can't be too heavy," says Grace Semler Baldridge, an independent Christian artist who performs as Semler and who has topped both the iTunes Christian albums and song charts. In addition to her own crop of frankly honest songs about her faith, she's done session work and built relationships with artists in the CCM industry. There, she immediately became aware of a few soft rules of the genre.

First, she says, there's a just-right spot when it comes to beats per minute — not too fast, not too slow. After BPMs, there are "JPMs," or "Jesuses per minute." While there's no hard-and-fast rule on the required number of JPMs, more tends to be better — and a reference to "Him," "God," "Father," etc., counts, Semler says. Choruses should be rife with repetition so that listeners can sing along by the second round. The guitar must be warm but just a bit bright, with a touch of drive and a long-tail reverb that hangs in the air. Most important, there's the delay, which nearly doubles the guitars' slow strums and picked melodies — a technique that Reverb.com's "The Gear, Tones, and Techniques of Modern Worship Guitar" guide says was pulled directly from U2's the Edge.

In many ways, EMF helped shape this sound over decades; one evangelical-church band member I spoke with called it "K-LOVE-ification of Christian music." With hundreds of stations rebroadcasting a single K-LOVE feed, Christian artists and record labels saw that they had a singular opportunity. Instead of shipping CDs to dozens of stations the country over, pleading with program directors for airtime, and racking up long-distance phone bills, artists and their labels had to convince just one set of people that their song was worth playing: those deciding the playlist at EMF.

In the 1980s and 1990s, K-LOVE could be heard playing Christian pop rock and crossover artists like Amy Grant. Its sister chain, Air1, focused more on Christian "alternative" music, anchored over the years by bands like dc Talk and Relient K. But over time, K-LOVE and Air1 converged on a niche in the marketplace: the rock-tinged, undoubting pop of "worship" music — "the sound of the megachurch," as Leah Payne describes it. The Christian-music business's target audience member — whom industry leaders brazenly refer to as "Becky" — is a full-time mom who desperately wants a reliably unoffensive station to play in the car while carting the kids from school to soccer. With a suburban sound, the songs are just as easily heard on Sunday morning as in the car ride to school.

While the idea that overdrive and a sizzling beat might fuel crises of faith may seem laughable, the history of Christianity's interminglings with rock is indeed a fraught one. Cliché as it is now, postwar Christian parents really were in an all-out panic about rock & roll. And for many *white* Christians, the dangers of rock & roll didn't just lie in the charisma of performers, their dripping sweat, and the promise of carnal satisfaction. Ingrained in many white evangelicals' disdain for rock was a deep-seeded, racist fear of the so-called "race-mixing" genre. In 1958, for example, while the staunch segregationist Asa Carter was leading an anti-rock & roll campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, masked members of the local KKK (who identified as Christian) sabotaged the antenna of a local "Black-oriented" radio station, cutting it down and causing outages.

But as the 1960s came to an end, the nearly unthinkable happened: Rock music and the burgeoning hippie lifestyle brought many followers to Jesus. While young, paisley-clad members of the counterculture had come to the movement seeking peace and love, many found its drug-addled displays shallow and fleeting, as their musical heroes died young and bands ended in cold-shouldered turmoil. Commodified, half-baked explorations of Eastern spirituality proved insufficient and even disillusionary for some seekers.

Many flower children found what they were looking for in Jesus — or a new branding of the guy, who suddenly seemed to bear some anachronistic similarities to the hippies themselves: hair long, clad in sandals and loose, flowing clothing, vocally opposed to the government in power, like a Galilean Jerry Garcia.

Across California, a handful of savvy men of the cloth worked with more streetwise evangelists, helping them to establish Christian "coffeehouses" — havens like the Living Room near Haight-Ashbury, or His Place on Los Angeles' Sunset Strip. Everyone from fresh-eyed teens to drying-out twentysomethings flooded in to hear folk-rock artists sing songs of praise and faith and doubt and salvation, or to sit on the floor for caffeine-fueled, come-as-you-are worship sessions that focused on Jesus' right-on teachings. Soon, popular bands were dabbling in the divine, with Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" proclaiming that you "gotta have a friend in Jesus," and the Byrds declaring that "Jesus is just all right with me."

In 1969, a motorcycle-riding coffeehouse regular named Larry Norman released what many critics considered to be the first Christian rock album, *Upon This Rock*. With a black ascot around his neck and piecey, blond curtain bangs fanning out over his eyebrows, looking like a hippie Gwyneth Paltrow weary from preaching on a windy street corner all day (an activity he was known to do), Norman wrote for an audience of "flower children disillusioned by the government and the church," according to the Christian Broadcasting Network.

Across the pond, meanwhile, young composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice made a rock musical based on the life of Christ and his followers; the *Jesus Christ Superstar* album beat out Carole King's *Tapestry* to be the top-selling record of 1971. That year, a pop-art-style Jesus adorned the cover of *Time* magazine, with a halo of text reading "The Jesus Revolution" arcing about the prophet's head. The "Jesus Freaks" had arrived.

Many in the mainstream church found this new, pop-culture Jesus and his freewheeling followers blasphemous. But some religious leaders were willing to play the long game with these unlikely seekers, including the prominent evangelical minister Billy Graham, who preached God's love at rock concerts. In 1972, Graham's youth-oriented group Campus Crusade hosted a six-day event known as Explo '72 and often regarded as the "Christian Woodstock." Eighty thousand high school and college-aged hippie-types flooded Dallas for prayer sessions and seminars on how to evangelize before enjoying evening performances by the likes of Norman (who would soon release his pointed song "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?"), plus special performances by Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson.

While many people saw Explo '72 as the organic culmination of the "Jesus Freak" movement, many critics have since regarded it as something else: the moment when conservative evangelical leaders finally figured out how to begin to bend youth culture to their will. For many aging flower children, the music-driven ministry provided an easy path into the mainstream church — and the budding CCM industry. By the late 1970s, the genre's rebellious roots had been excised, and "contemporary Christian music," increasingly conservative in style and substance, even had its own *Billboard* charts.

This was the world in which EMF founder Bob Anthony Fogal had the idea for his "Christian KFRC." Like Graham and the holy men who helped shape the coffeehouse movement from behind the scenes, Fogal embraced the attitude that Christian music should meet people where they're at, even if that means playing increasingly vapid, quasi-religious music. "No Christian-ese" remained a guiding principle.

It's a strategy that has been central to Christian pop ever since: Use the music and aesthetic of the counterculture to ease followers' transition into mainline evangelicalism — and build a quietly conservative wing of modern life by making CCM mainstream. "Christian contemporary music," says Payne, "is an effort to shape the world through popular culture." CCM was useful in other ways, too: The music helped keep young people coming back. "It was," says Payne, "about keeping church children in the church."

**There's no set rule on how many "JPMs" — "Jesuses per minute"— a CCM song needs, but more tends to be better. References to "Him," "God," and "Father" count.**

**ON K-LOVE TODAY,** you won't hear any explicit politicking. You didn't in the early days, either. For one thing, its nonprofit status means it can't legally engage in any political campaign activity. (Perhaps it was merely a coincidence when, in the 1990s, EMF applied to build a new K-LOVE station on the same frequency as a Northern California community-radio station that had programming specifically for and by lesbians — prompting outcry from the existing station.) But conservatism is, in many ways, baked into the business. Fogal had the early support of Watergate "hatchet man" turned evangelical political commentator Chuck Colson. Over the years, EMF staff have donated primarily to conservative

PACs. And though he was no longer involved with the company at the time, Fogal said in a 2022 interview that EMF was more necessary than ever, and that its enormity gave it "tremendous opportunities to impact our culture and even affect the direction of our country back towards God." In the United States today, he asserted, "good is being called evil and vice versa. Evil is not just operating behind the scenes, it's right there in our faces. Lawlessness. Post-term abortions. You name it." ("Post-term abortions," it should be noted, are not a thing.) Fogal went on to criticize his local Spokane City Council for allegedly underfunding the police while spending money on "Gay Pride-themed murals."

Despite the apolitical front, the CCM industry has a major anti-LGBTQ problem. "I went to this meeting with a pretty big-time CCM music manager … and he was like, 'You gotta stop baiting K-LOVE,'" Semler Baldridge tells me with a wry grin, her cropped bleach-blond hair falling comfortably across her forehead. Semler, who is queer, has tried repeatedly to get her music on K-LOVE, but it's never happened — not even when her 2021 album, *Preacher's Kid*, topped Apple's Christian chart. While many of her songs deal with doubt and the realities of being a queer Christian — topics K-LOVE doesn't touch — some of her songs are just plain worship music: poppy, repetitive, and perfect, she says, for K-LOVE. (Semler says she tried to capture the classic CCM sound on her song "Raise Up," but "apparently it still sounded too gay.") Last year, as her song "Faith" was on its way to Number One on the iTunes Christian chart, she took to X, formerly Twitter, to ask K-LOVE if it would play the explosive single. They never gave her the time of day. "It's just so blatant, their exclusion of LGBTQ people," she says. Though EMF hasn't spoken ill of Christian artists who have come out, several queer artists have lost airtime on Christian radio after opening up about their sexuality.

Even so, Semler wishes she and other queer Christian artists could have the platform that K-LOVE would give her. "I've had some people on the inside [at EMF] that are like, 'We're affirming, we're making progress, hang tight, hold tight.' But I don't know how much I'm willing to wait for that at this stage of my life."

The more Semler dives into the mainstream world of Christian rock, the more she is turned off by it — and not just for its inability to support LGBTQ artists. She recently crashed a CCM award ceremony in Nashville called the Dove Awards. "The nicest cars I've seen in my life were at the Dove Awards," she says. "We were talking about Jesus the whole time, and I was like, 'He'd hate it here.'"

Though few and far between, other Christians have questioned the plush material conditions of industry leaders and EMF executives. In 2016, Warren Throckmorton, a retired psychology professor in Pennsylvania and evangelical blogger with a defiant streak, whose professional headshot looks straight out of *The Blues Brothers*, started blogging about red flags he heard on K-LOVE's fundraising drives. He'd never had a bone to pick with K-LOVE before: He lived within earshot of three K-LOVE stations, his wife and kids listened; as a member of his church band, he'd learned to play many of the songs at the request of his younger congregants. But Throckmorton couldn't defend the on-air hosts who praised a hard-up caller who donated to K-LOVE rather than paying an outstanding bill. And he found K-LOVE's repeated asks for an "easy gift" of $40 a month disingenuous, especially when the nationwide, syndicated hosts would "say things like, 'Help keep K-LOVE on the air in your area!'" Throckmorton recalls. "They weren't using that money to keep local stations on the air. They were using that money to buy up new stations," he says. "It seems like it is less ministry and more business."

I prod Throckmorton a bit, mentioning the things that other Christians had told me they like about the stations: the positive messages and the inspirational stories in between songs. They have pastors on staff who field prayer requests, and who privately answer calls from distraught listeners (a service that EMF says has succeeded in everything from guiding people through crises of faith to averting suicide attempts). Throckmorton pauses, his tone somewhere between exasperation and bemusement. "If you can keep yourself unaware of some of the things that I pointed out, you can enjoy it." He adds, "It spoiled it for me."

EVERY WEEKDAY AFTERNOON at three these days, DJ Mistress Carrie takes the mic at rock radio station the Pike in Worcester, a small city an hour west of Boston. It's a good gig, but her old Boston listeners can't hear it on their radios — the signal cuts out well beyond city limits on the Mass Turnpike. Sitting in her car outside her new workplace, though, she can easily pick up the massive K-LOVE signal that replaced WAAF. And just in case one station in the Boston area wasn't enough, EMF bought a second signal there in 2022, giving K-LOVE extra reach into the North Shore and Gloucester. Like the stations that replaced WAAF, it's just another unmanned transmitter, rebroadcasting the same bland Christian rock from California and spreading its conservative pop-culture alternative even farther.

Today, the Educational Media Foundation is everywhere. You can hear it on the air from New York to San Francisco, or tune in on the K-LOVE and Air1 apps. Starting at $1,148, you can join the K-LOVE Friends and Family Cruise. The company had a growth spurt during the pandemic, taking advantage of the advertising decline that hit commercial radio stations. Last year, EMF bought out stations in Memphis, Buffalo, Atlantic City, and dozens of other cities across the country. EMF gives even the biggest for-profit media conglomerates a run for their money: Just a handful of years ago, it bought six big city stations from Cumulus — the country's third-largest station holder — for $103.5 million.

And true community broadcasters have even less of a chance in the face of EMF's buying sprees — especially when the billion-dollar organization can offer iHeart-level prices for neighborhood stations.

Even as the media industry has grown increasingly consolidated, the FCC has held onto one major policy to give small broadcasters a ghost of a chance, and to keep any one company from having too much sway over the public: To this day, it is illegal for a single company to own more than five AM or five FM stations in any one city. But there's a catch, says engineer and local-radio advocate Urick, a "loophole for noncommercial broadcasters": The FCC never applied this ownership cap to nonprofits. It also doesn't count translators, the meat of EMF's explosive growth, toward those totals. "In the San Jose area," Urick tells me, "they're on eight (FM) frequencies."

Today, a small number of community-media activists are still asking the FCC to limit the number of translators a single company could own, or to cap the number of frequencies a nonprofit can occupy in a single city, as it does with for-profits. But with the agency focused on things like internet access and digital privacy, radio — despite still being listened to by more than four of every five Americans every week — often gets overlooked. And EMF doesn't appear to be raising eyebrows at the commission; it has no flashy violations, no big lawsuits. To Urick, it feels like a David-versus-Goliath fight, but Goliath keeps winning.

Those in the CCM industry know that the genre is a punchline for most Americans. And many people I spoke with told me that this may work to EMF's advantage: That the organization evades scrutiny with the help of an intentionally prosaic facade, cloaking its money-stacking, culture-flattening project in banality. And this is nothing new for the group: When Fogal first incorporated the organization, it was called "Christian Media Ministries." But before the first station launched, Fogal met with an attorney who helped churches to navigate the turbulent waters of the FCC. The attorney suggested that he change the organization's name to the Educational Media Foundation. Fogal would say later that he felt the name was "bland and boring." But the attorney, Fogal recalled, "said that was actually a good thing." If the country's second-largest radio-station owner was still named Christian Media Ministries, perhaps others would have taken notice.

Leah Payne warns critics against mistaking kitsch for a lack of importance and influence. The politicking and legislation of the religious right, she says, is the tip of the iceberg. Beneath it is a whole culture that includes not just politics, but entertainment, arts, and music. Those who hold the CCM cards are wielding conservatives' soft power. "If we're not attentive to them," Payne says of those shaping the industry, "we're going to miss out on a lot."

But for now, EMF and the Christian-rock industry, it seems, are happy to be a joke if it keeps scrutinizing eyes off them. "The public just doesn't really care what they're doing," says Urick.

Keep letting Christian rock be nothing more than a punchline. The Educational Media Foundation, it seems, thanks you. ®

# Kristen Stewart

# Uncensored

After more than two decades in the spotlight, Stewart knows who she is — and what she wants

**BY ALEX MORRIS**
**PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLLIER SCHORR**

# Kristen Stewart is strong as fuck,

and I do not mean this metaphorically. I am not, for instance, talking about any experience from her past that she has quote-unquote risen above, like that time she was in those vampire-werewolf movies and dubbed the World's Most Hated Actress because she did not appear sufficiently stoked to sit in a room full of journalists and discuss making out with her co-stars. Or the time she was photographed kissing her much older (and married) *Snow White and the Huntsman* director, and, due to the horror this engendered, was banished from the sequel. I am not talking about the bravery it took to play Joan Jett in front of Joan Jett. Or the bravery it took to play Princess Diana in front of the entire moviegoing world. Or the bravery it took to come out on *SNL* in the form of a snappy retort to the mean tweets of a demented reality-show host turned president. In other words, I am not talking about "strength" as the gold-star descriptor given to famous women who don't crumble beneath the other labels society lobs at them. No. I am talking, quite literally, about Kristen Stewart's biceps.

OK, let me back up. It's an early afternoon in January. We're on a large deck perched neatly on a hillside of Los Feliz, with a commanding view of tropical foliage. The weather has reverted to that bland meteorological perfection endemic to Los Angeles, despite a morning that was topsy-turvy, bringing down a small tree in Stewart's yard. "Wtf kinda crazy witch energy you bring to L.A.?!!" read an email waiting in my inbox when I awoke. "It's crazy out there!" It was the latest message in a chain we'd started to try to figure out what to do on our second day together, though the back-and-forth had quickly devolved (evolved?) into a series of book and article recommendations and Stewart's confession that, when it comes to these types of interviews, "the disco anxiety *is* real."

Eventually, she invites me along to what she'd planned to do anyway that afternoon: kickbox with her trainer Rashad. We are ostensibly meeting so she can promote *Love Lies Bleeding,* a roided-up romantic thriller directed by Rose Glass, in which Stewart plays a gym manager lusting after a bodybuilder (played by Katy O'Brian) who, as Stewart describes it, "comes in and shakes up the Coke can, but it fucking explodes and everyone gets messy" ("messy" being the quaintest way possible to describe the bloody, sweaty, id-driven hellscape that follows). In this context, kickboxing is the sort of cliché, movie-promotion-adjacent thing Stewart would usually refuse to do, and therefore, we figured, the most subversive thing she could do. "Less talk, more rock," she advised.

By now, it's pretty well-established that "subversive" is Stewart's thing. Imagine her, age 17, refusing to play Bella Swan in the perky, bright-eyed manner the adults all had in mind, and choosing instead to mope around like she was *actually in love with an undead person.* ("The studio was trying to make a movie for kids. They didn't want what actually was the book. When the fuck are [Bella and Edward] smiling, ever?") Then, having spent five years on a franchise that earned more than $3.5 billion worldwide, spawned such things as *Twilight*-branded blow dryers, and momentarily made Stewart the highest-paid actress in the world, there was the transition once and (mostly) for all to art-house indies — which she'd been making in between all those *Twilight* installments, sometimes shooting three or four movies a year. There was *Clouds of Sils Maria,* for which she turned down the part of the starlet in favor of the slightly grubby assistant, and proceeded to win a César (the French equivalent of the Oscar), the only American woman to have done so. There was *Spencer,* which earned her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress for so artfully crawling out of her own skin. After we hung out, she was headed to Park City, Utah, where she was being honored with a Visionary Award while premiering her 11th and 12th Sundance films — *Love Lies Bleeding* as well as *Love Me,* a post-apocalyptic romance in which she plays a buoy to Steven Yeun's satellite ("Basically, the internet — the knowable universe — is contained in this machinery, and they start trying to figure out how to date," she explains). "We were starting to film, and it can be a very tense scene," Yeun tells me of working with Stewart on such an unconventional project. "She just put her hand on my shoulder and was like, 'Hey, I like you.' And that just melted away all the brain fog. She's very deep and cool that way."

That depth and cool have long made Stewart a go-to choice for countercultural roles, women who stand out because they are at a remove from whatever world envelops them. But they are also the qualities behind Stewart's ability to make characters seem countercultural by virtue of the fact that she is playing them, bringing a reserve and restraint that might seem like underkill in a franchise in which she has to speak, out loud, lines like "Hello, biceps!" but that scintillates in more nuanced fare. "She understands how people cover, and she is able to play that, which makes her work so interesting and different," says Jodie Foster, who began shooting *Panic Room* with Stewart when she was 10. "I remember just being in awe of this kid."

By the time I arrive at her house, Stewart, now 33, has been up for many hours. There was a spell when she had "a very fucked-up relationship with sleep," but now she goes to bed early and rises early, waking up to work with fiancee Dylan Meyer on one of the many projects being spearheaded by Nevermind, the production company the two founded with producer Maggie McLean in 2023. (Stewart tells me that it wasn't named after the Nirvana album per se, but that they do share the band's urge to "somehow slip in and fuck shit up for the better.") "Me and Dylan are writing something, so the first three hours, we treasure them. Our brains are just working well at that time," Stewart says. "When she moved into this house, I had no curtains, three forks, and I never drank coffee, and I was like, 'I don't sleep.' She's like, 'In the morning, you drink coffee and you work, and you're alive, and you're awake, and then at night you close the curtains.' In retrospect, it was so obvious."

When Stewart leads me outside, Meyer is already on the deck, limbering up in a white New Order T-shirt while Rashad arranges yoga mats and free weights. Soon Stewart has a playlist going, and Rashad is having us "separate our shoulder blades and engage our core" to the croons of Vivien Goldman as Stewart's black rescue mutt, Cole, meanders between the mats. We stretch. We shadowbox. Then comes the moment Stewart had warned me about: the chin-up competition on a free-standing contraption set up on the deck. I do approximately zero. Meyer manages several. Stewart does chin-up after chin-up after chin-up, then switches to a different grip and does some more, as we all look on admiringly.

"You should know that Kristen is good at everything. It's both inspiring but also annoying," Meyer says to me quietly without a hint of actual annoyance.

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"Let's go, let's go, let's go!" Rashad screams. "You're strong as fuck, let's go!"

Stewart finally drops from the bar, panting.

She flashes that famous sideways grin, and then glances toward the body pads: "Let's get in the ring."

It had been a subversion of the idea of a "strong woman" that led Stewart to *Love Lies Bleeding,* she'd told me a few weeks earlier, sitting in her living room on a black leather sofa under large metal letters that spell out "ASS." This afternoon, it is witchy raining, and the view out the glass doors barely goes past the deck, where in addition to the pull-up stand, there is a claw-foot bathtub Stewart had moved from one of the bathrooms and hooked up outside ("It breaks a lot, but it's really fucking nice to take a bath out there"). Unimposing from the outside, the house slopes down the hillside elegantly, but is haphazardly furnished and a little unkempt. Across from the sunken living room — where a white plastic mannequin perches on a bench laid out with stacks of Nevermind scripts and papers — there is a wall of books to one side (Mary Shelley, Jack Kerouac, Kim Gordon, Kathy Acker) and a sort of game room to the other, complete with an orange-topped pool table, a *Playboy* pinball machine, a row of metal lockers, and a refrigerator with a large orange biohazard sticker on the door. A room off the kitchen boasts a crumbling sofa, a drum kit, and a collection of acoustic and electric guitars. Near the stairs, water stains mark the ceiling, and the words "life is beautiful" are graffitied in bright-red paint.

"Just so you know, that 'life is beautiful' thing — do you know Mr. Brainwash?" Stewart motions wryly to the graffitied wall. "He came over with a friend of mine and did this, and I was like, 'So I know that I do sort of live in a frat house, but that is psychotic.' Do you know what I mean? To think that you could just do that to someone's fucking house." During the pandemic, Stewart graffitied the word "MAINLY" underneath in all caps. "Anyway," she continues, shrugging, "just to contextualize that: Fuck that guy."

Stewart bought the house about 12 years ago, as a place to "go hide in" during a breakup with Robert Pattinson, back when they were both having to ride around in the trunks of cars to try to thwart the prying paparazzi. In a theoretical way, she understands the interest people still have in that relationship — she really does — but as she'll later tell me: "Rob and I can't just keep talking about that shit, because it's fucking weird. It's like if someone kept asking you — I mean for literally decades — 'But senior year in high school?' You're like, 'Fucking A, man! I don't know!'"

Whatever her reserve on film, today Stewart has an excitable, spring-loaded quality. Soon after we begin talking, she wanders off, without preamble, to change from black leather workman's shoes into sneakers ("I'm a soft-shoe guy. I went somewhere today and got dressed or whatever, but now I'm like, 'Why the fuck am I in these big shoes?'"). A few minutes later, she wanders off again ("She just keeps walking away from me," she narrates from my perspective), and returns from the biohazard fridge with two Coors Lights. "You can have a beer if you want," she announces. "I'm going to have one."

We crack open the cans. She returns to the couch. She wears a worn, black T-shirt with holes in both armpits, baggy black jeans, and chipped black nail polish. Her mullet is pulled into a short ponytail at the back of her head, dark strands escaping errantly.

"Do you already know what you're—" she stops herself. "I know actors are defensive. I don't mean this, like, 'Do you already know what you're going to write?' But are you already — I don't know — a little outlined or something?"

No, I tell her. We only just met. How could I know what the contours of the story would be?

"OK, cool." She leans toward me, legs wide and elbows on her knees. "We'll figure something out."

There's a lot to say about *Love Lies Bleeding,* so we might as well start there. And here's how that went: Stewart was in London for the premiere of *Spencer.* The morning after, having slept not a wink ("We were really Englanding out"), she came down to the lobby of her swanky "press junket" hotel for a meeting with director Rose Glass, whose debut film, *Saint Maud* — a psychological fever dream about religious obsession — Stewart had loved. They sat at a table off to one side. They sipped tea. Glass explained that her takeaway of what people wanted from her next was a film about a strong woman, a strong lead character.

**"It was really fun to be allowed to have the little, dikey sister be the main protagonist."**

"What does that mean?" Stewart asks now, narrowing her eyes. "It's bullshit. It means that we're not actually letting women define themselves. It's the assumption that we need to be empowered by the people deciding who gets to have perspective, that we have to provide something aspirational. It's the lowest-hanging fruit there is." Glass told her that she had figured out a way to subvert that expectation: She had taken the note literally. "She was like, 'Strong girl? Bodybuilding. Got it.' Simple as that."

By the time she left the meeting, Stewart knew she would take the part that Glass had written with her in mind — the role of Lou, the gym manager, who is butch and tough and closed like a fist, until the bodybuilder, Jackie, explodes her whole world — but she didn't officially sign on until she'd returned to L.A. and read the script. "I had some friends over for dinner when I got the message," says Glass of receiving the news. "I think I was a bit drunk already. I just remember there being lots of very jubilant shouting and excited jumping up and down."

Afterward, Stewart finished the campaign expected of Oscar-nominated actors ("It becomes like you're teaching a curriculum on your movie") and then flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where *Love Lies Bleeding* would film, showing up at Glass' house with a stylist to lay waste to Diana's blond hair, even grabbing the scissors at the end to make it look like Lou had cut her mullet herself. "Once I cut my hair, I was like, 'See you, forever,'" Stewart says of leaving *Spencer* behind.

Lou was a very different story — a character whose seedy, pumped-up world could not have been more different from Princess Diana's gilded cage, whose sex scenes were about female pleasure and female bodies alone, who wasn't aspirational or going on some journey of self-discovery, and who was not at all the type of person about whom movies are generally made. "It was really fucking fun to be allowed to have the little, dikey sister be the main protagonist in a movie," Stewart says. "That's never the main character in a movie. That's never the one that you want to fuck. I mean, that's the one some people do, but not the one that you are prescribed to want to fuck."

As an openly gay movie star — "and there aren't that many openly gay movie stars" — it felt personal in a way Stewart hadn't quite expected: a queer film that didn't revolve around the "coming out" narrative, and in which the queerness was less a plot point than a vibe. She has long talked about roles as not a form of escapism, but rather a means of exploring different facets of her identity — imagining who she might be if her "nature" had been exposed to an entirely different "nurture." But playing Lou felt like a return to her "first setting," she tells me. "It is a really weird, kind of moving return to form in some way. Kind of like who you are when you're 11 — physically, the clothes you choose to wear — before you've just been pummeled by male expectation."

She takes a swig of beer and leans back into the sofa. "I never have felt like I have performed a femininity in order to reap its benefits in a way that felt like a lie," she continues. "I'm very fluid, and I've never felt like, 'Oh, wow, I was doing this lie for a long time in order to get jobs.' That would be wrong. I have had a good time playing with all of the tonal qualities. But there's so much room for success when you choose the girlie one. There's no room for this other one."

OK, let me back up again. Because nurture does matter, here are some broad strokes.

Stewart grew up in the Los Angeles suburb of Woodland Hills. Her dad was a stage manager who worked on shows like the Oscars and *Fear Factor,* and when Stewart went to work with him, she hated it — all the rushing around and commotion ("I would hide in the engineers' room and play bass with them"). Her mom was a script supervisor who worked on movies like *Mortal Kombat* and *Little Giants,* and when Stewart went to work with *her,* she loved it — the quiet and stillness, the feeling of everyone working together to suspend some fragile bubble of make-believe. When she was eight, and because she had noticed acting was the only job kids could have that allowed them to miss school, she asked her mom to take her to an audition seminar, one of those one-stop shops where you get headshots and the promise of being connected to some agents if you don't suck too much. Stewart — whose drama experience up to that point consisted of reenacting scenes from *Titanic* on the jungle gym at school — found that she didn't.

She booked a Porsche commercial. Then she booked *The Safety of Objects*. Then David Fincher saw the Porsche commercial and had his people track her down, and she booked *Panic Room.* "I mean, everybody said at the time, 'Look, if this kid wants to continue to do this, she's absolutely got the acumen; she's got the sensitivity,'" Fincher tells me. "But when you're standing next to Jodie Foster, and the

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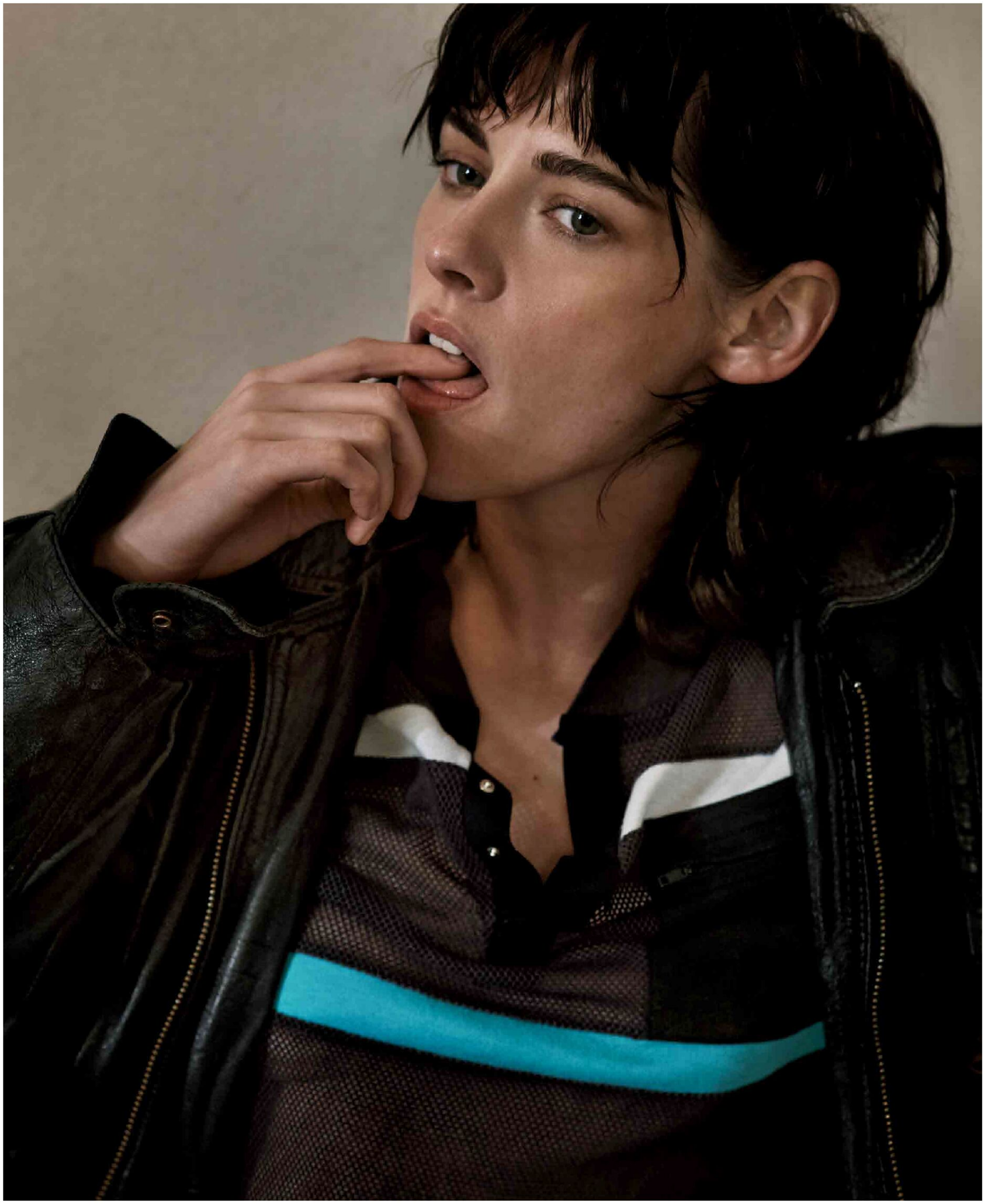

question for a 10- or 11-year-old is 'What do you want to do with the rest of your life?' — you know, Jodie's extremely protective of people who are not capable of making those decisions: 'She doesn't need to think about that. She needs to think about what we're doing before lunch.'"

Anyway, there was only so much Foster could do: When shit hit the fan for Stewart, career prospects had nothing to do with it. Puberty did. "It's as soon as I started to want to have sex," Stewart specifies of the moment in sixth grade when she went from being like "everything's fucking gravy" to suddenly feeling like "I can't find the words and I want my face to be on the back of my head instead of the front." She takes another gulp of Coors: "Puberty is a real fucker."

There are a few core memories here: the time she went to school with her legs unshaved and someone was like, "*Eeeewwww*"; the time she accidentally hit a friend in the nuts, and he howled "Oh, you fucking *man*!"; the way guys treated her girlie friend Britni vis-à-vis the way they treated her. "I was immediately aware that these guys who I was friends with saw me as not fuckable," she says. "My sexuality is totally fluid. I'm all over the fucking map — and I think I was then. But I also really wanted to be normal and hot, so I was like, 'Cool. I'm going to do everything I can to try and fucking figure out how to look like a girl and get these guys to like me.' That's it. It's totally a normal story." Except that it didn't play out normally because by then she was well on her way to filming movies like *Into the Wild* and *Adventureland* and — as part of her actual *Twilight* audition, believe it or not — rolling around with Pattinson on director Catherine Hardwicke's own bed.

Which means that while Stewart was still figuring out who she was and what being "fuckable" meant to her, the world was busy schooling her on both fronts. She couldn't leave the house without the male gaze following her in the form of TMZ photographers, couldn't arrange her face without becoming the cultural signifier of every single woman who's ever been told, "You're so much prettier when you smile." Plus, it was the aughts ("The Nineties and the early 2000s were really horrific for young women. Don't you feel that way?"). Her anxiety got so bad that she'd lie on bathroom floors, unable to unclench her fists — *so* bad, at one point she had to be hospitalized ("They were like, 'She's dehydrated.' I was like, 'I'm not dehydrated. I'm fucking flipping out.' They gave me an IV and a mild sedative, and I started calming down and my hands started opening up, because you fucking atrophy").

There was a span of years when she couldn't enter a room without scoping out the exits, when she needed to know where a bathroom was at all times ("I was always like, 'Who knows? I could spontaneously combust in a puddle of puke right now'"). There was that period when she couldn't sleep, and then got addicted to not sleeping, thought she might die from not sleeping, but then, somehow, didn't. "I loved to be sad and shit," she tells me. "Oh, my God. I made a complete art project out of it: my whole life."

Of course, all of that was a long time ago. Stewart wanders over to the fridge and gets us another round. Here's the thing: She's grown up. That's not who she is now. But also: In a way, it kind of is. As a queer woman in the public eye, she's had occasion to think about identity, and what it all means. She's considered the arc of things. "And it goes: Jodie [Foster], me, boygenius," she says, plainly, of the spots she imagines they all hold on the queer-celebrity continuum. "I'm in the middle. Do you know what I mean? Jodie had such a hard time [as a gay actor], and I'm not speaking for her — I am objectively analyzing the time and place in which she was being her, and that is not easy — I would say fucking near-impossible if you wanted to continue doing what you love.

"For me, it wasn't a problem," she continues. "But that's probably because of the sort of space that I inhabit and the parts that I'm attracted to and the filmmakers that are attracted to me and the audience that exists for those movies. Had I really wanted to carve out more commercial space and maintain that, I don't know if that would've worked."

Still, she points out that, for her, coming out was not a painstaking process. She was "very physically out with my body" long before she publicly came out on *SNL*. And even that was a "very shoot-from-the-hip moment," she says. "It did not feel like this bloodletting." Nor was it something she'd planned in advance. She was merely sitting with the *SNL* writers, going, "This is the most boring monologue ever. What are we going to do? What the fuck?" when someone brought up Trump's tweets about her. "He's mad at me for cheating on my boyfriend?" she'd retorted. "Little does he know...." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew she'd use them. (As for her thoughts on Trump? "Of course he had to weigh in on my tarring and feathering. It's like, 'What is this 20-year-old who has no idea about life doing to this *man*?'" And: "He's such a little baby." And also: "Fuck you, bitch!").

**"I loved to be sad and shit. Oh, my God. I made a complete art project out of it: my whole life."**

She says that Foster has been a mentor to her — a number she will keep in her phone always, even if they aren't consistently in touch — and she's aware that her own openness about her queerness has likely been a model for others. But she also knows how much the needle has kept moving, at least in the "specialized little nook" of the world where she resides. She directed boygenius' "The Film" — a 14-minute music video that culminates in the three musicians making out with one another — and she can see the evolution from herself to them, how she has an awareness of gender-conformity that feels very "millennial" compared with what's on offer now. "I look at these kiddos that are so chilling on all of those fronts, and can have [gender] be like an accessory, can actually play with the novelty of that — have [femininity] one day, not have it the next." It's a psychological fluidity Stewart covets: "I'm so aware of these things."

And so she did what she could: She leaned into that awareness. She began reading mainly female writers ("I was really obsessed with male writers. I've only recently been like, 'What the fuck are they doing?'"). She began boning up on gender theory, giving herself the college education that, in another life, she might have had. She began thinking of female bodies not just physically and sexually, but also metaphorically ("The coolest fucking part of us is that we have this ever-present and unclosable opening, and we're walking around with it all the time, and we sort of pretend like it's not there, but it's our greatest strength"). She began to interrogate the "violence of the dynamic" when it comes to gender, whether someone has had a #MeToo moment or not (she says that she hasn't). "The violence and the shame that women internalize and then use as triggers for pleasure? We can't get away from it," she says. "To think that we know what we want in a way that's remotely divorced from the patriarchy is impossible. We will never. And I'm so much more interested in leaning into that versus away." In other words, she began, as she puts it, "*Vagina Monologue*-ing all over the place."

Some years back, Stewart read a memoir that seemed to magically spew onto the page all that was cohering in her mind. Before she'd even finished *The Chronology of Water*, she emailed its author, Lidia Yuknavitch, asking if she could adapt her story, a cult favorite about female shame and female rage and female art and female-on-female BDSM and a bunch of other things "so taboo it's almost horny." It took Stewart years to complete the screenplay, which she refers to as a "living document." For several weeks while she was working on it, she camped in a van outside Yuknavitch's Pacific Northwest home. Then she read the script to Yuknavitch, out loud, in the writer's living room. Then she cast Imogen Poots to play Yuknavitch. Then she went looking for money to make the actual movie, which proved to be damn near impossible because, as it turns out, female shame and female rage and female art and female-on-female BDSM are topics that are not seen to lend themselves to box-office gold. Which only underscored how *every single fucking thing in the book was true.*

We'd been having a fairly chill time up until this point, but suddenly Stewart is standing up, pacing back and forth in front of the bookshelf. She knows her screenplay is "radical in a million ways." She knows she's never directed *The Tree of Life*. But she also knows the misogyny embedded in the system and that she could make something subversive and beautiful and true if only she were given the chance. "And it makes me fucking angry. And not in a way that's like, 'I've been doing this for so long, and so therefore I deserve it.' It's really more like, 'If I were a man, you would *fucking believe me!*'"

Stewart's voice has risen to the point that she is screaming now, over there by the books. Eventually she strides to the pool table and begins racking the balls.

"Do you want to play a game of pool?" she asks. "It's the party trick of any fledgling lesbian." It may be worth mentioning that we are not entirely sober at this point. Outside the window, it's too dark to tell if it's still raining.

Stewart chalks a cue and then leans over the table and breaks. It's soon clear that she's the better player: When she sinks a ball, it's swift and decisive. Still, she's distracted by the conversation. Have I read any Jeanette Winterson? Or Kate Zambreno? What about Genesis P-Orridge's memoir? That's an extreme experience! Do I realize that we are setting ourselves up for failure here, with this whole cover-story thing?

CLOTHING: SECOND SPREAD: VEST BY VENA CAVA. JOCKSTRAP BY BIKE ATHLETICS. THIRD SPREAD: SHIRT IS SUBJECT'S OWN. JEANS BY LEVI'S. FOURTH SPREAD: VINTAGE NIKE SHIRT FROM STRAN STARS BEST. UNDERWEAR BY COU COU. PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACKET: VINTAGE WINLIT. SHIRT IS SUBJECT'S OWN. THIS SPREAD: SHIRT: FABRICATED FOR SHOOT. SHORTS AND SOCKS: LA APPAREL. FOLLOWING SPREAD: SHIRT: VINTAGE ON HOLLYWOOD.

That it's impossible to pin down any moment in time, any fixed identity? Still, she wants the cover image to send a clear message: hyper-sexualized, left of andro, and flipping the gender script. "If I got through the entire *Twilight* series without ever doing a Rolling Stone cover, it's because the boys were the sex symbols," she points out. "Now, I want to do the gayest fucking thing you've ever seen in your life. If I could grow a little mustache, if I could grow a fucking happy trail and unbutton my pants, I would. Guys — I'm sorry — but their fucking pubes are shoved in my face constantly, and I'm like, '*Ummmm,* bring it in.'"

Apropos to that, she won't give up on *Chronology,* she wants me to know. She's been talking about it with journalists for years — to the point that it's getting embarrassing — but it's now her only plan for the future. She'll keep writing things with Meyer, keep looking for other stories they could tell that she feels aren't being told, but she's not taking other parts; the next movie she films she wants to be her own.

I make a bank shot, and she looks at me with mock horror: "Now get the fuck out of my house."

By the time we plunk ourselves back down in her living room a few weeks later, Stewart seems more relaxed, and not just from the endorphins released by her millions of chin-ups. About a week before our first meeting, she'd traveled to Latvia to location-scout for *Chronology,* and had been astounded by the beauty and diversity of the landscape — beaches that looked like Florida just a few miles from forests that looked like the Pacific Northwest. She'd now calculated that the movie could be shot there for a fraction of the cost, and though it was weird for her to consider making a movie outside of the Hollywood system, she was coming around to the idea. With these set pieces, she felt she could keep the project small and intimate, could suspend that fragile bubble of make-believe. "I don't want 80 people on set," she says. "If I see a truck, I'll lose my fucking mind."

Over the years, Stewart's most intimate relationships have tended to be with people she views as creative partners, which, she admits, has "not been great for having relationships." When it comes to Meyer, she says, "we don't have that separation. I found the right person because I can be so obsessive about what I do. And luckily my girlfriend, my partner, we are into the same shit. We have taken the things that we're spending our time on and interlocked them, and we're so much fucking smarter and stronger together. And you're just like, 'Fuck, that is the best.'"

The two met on the set of *American Ultra,* connected immediately ("in a way where you aren't sure if you want to fuck or be like, 'Dude, let's think of a handshake'"), and then unconnected immediately because of other romantic entanglements ("We were both so wrapped up in fucking other things, literally"). Six years later, they ran into each other again. Stewart asked why they hadn't stayed in touch. Meyer said she'd emailed. Stewart scoffed and then — oops — pulled up all the messages she'd ghosted. "It was my fault, for sure," she says. "But then I very much made this [relationship] happen. I was intense, because I was just positive."

Which, she found, was an interesting place to be. For so much of her adulthood, Stewart had felt unsettled. Years had been spent "really white-knuckling life and getting off on the highs and lows of things" and running headlong into "fucking horrific relationships" and leaning into experiences that were "emotionally psychotropic" because you can then "put so much into your art." And art had come out of it, art she'd sometimes even been proud of, art where she's been able to "deposit desire in people" and make her feelings their feelings — and, honestly, what's fucking better than that? "There was never a moment where I was like, 'Man, what am I doing with the time that I have on this Earth?'" she says. "I don't know what the fuck else I'd be doing. I love it."

And, look, it has been great to experience all these facets of herself, great to try them on and then figure out how she wanted to cast herself in her real life, which — let's be honest — is what we all do, all the time: "We make choices every fucking day about who we're going to be. Not in a controlling way, but just in a way that acknowledges, 'This is who I am. It's the easiest one. It's the one that's the most comfortable. It's the one I've chosen.'"

But also — and bear with her here; she knows she's about to contradict herself — she's aware that there can be something fundamental to who we are that can be lost and hard to retrieve. "I feel like I'm just getting back to that 11-year-old," she says. "It does take kind of a long period of growing up in order to get back to who you were when you were a little guy." She knows these things "might seem like a contradiction, like I'm presenting something that doesn't play well together." She balks at the concept of "authenticity" ("Are you fucking kidding me? We are all so malleable"). But she still feels like maybe there's something essential that you feel the loss of when it's denied, something that can help you grow into who you once were and stick that out, because "it's boring to not. It is unevolved to not. Now, I'm actually creating a home where I'm an adult and a person."

**"Now, I want to do the gayest fucking thing you've ever seen in your life."**

A few years back, Stewart and Meyer moved into a house down the road, keeping this one to use as the offices of Nevermind and as a landing pad for friends going through breakups or other hard times, as Stewart was when she bought it (she refers to it as the "Heartbreak Hotel," adding that it's otherwise "crazy to have a secondary mansion down the street from your house"). Since Meyer proposed in 2021, they've thrown around ideas of how they want to get married, once joking (or half-joking? Or not joking?) that they wanted Guy Fieri to officiate. Since then, they've realized that their main focus needs to be their two passion projects — Stewart's *Chronology* and Meyer's *The Wrong Girls,* in which Stewart will star and which she describes as "a stoner buddy comedy about two slacker girls coming of age." It's the one movie that Stewart says that she would do if it got greenlit before *Chronology.* With all that percolating, Stewart explains, "we don't have it in us to have a big wedding. We're probably just going to do it soon. We just are busy trying to make movies because they're our babies."

Then again, they've been talking about the possibility of actual babies. "I don't know what my family's going to look like, but there's no fucking way that I don't start acquiring kids," Stewart told me during our first meeting. "And also, ideally at some point soon I go, 'I want to have a kid.' I really want that to happen." Having watched that desire solidify in so many of their friends, she and Meyer have started making preparations for how they might go about getting pregnant, and have discussed the possibility of carrying each other's embryos. "I'm not scared of being pregnant. I'm not scared of having a kid," Stewart tells me. "But I'm so fucking scared of childbirth, it's crazy. Have you ever been too on drugs where you've suddenly needed to be on your hands and knees?" she asks of that sensation of your body operating outside your control. "I hate that. I mean, I smoke a lot of weed — I obviously self-medicate — but I don't like hard drugs. And I've tried — a lot. I just can't deal." Still, the thought of carrying a pregnancy is so "radical" that she'd like to think she could be up for facing that fear.

Right now, though, she can't wrap her head around creating anything — or anyone — before *Chronology.* She hopes that by March she's in Latvia shooting — she'd love to get there in time to capture some scenes of snow. She shows me the locations deck she put together, then asks if I want to see the sizzle, then spends several minutes fumbling with a remote control ("You know when you're too fucked up and you're trying to get music to play? This is like that"). Finally, she gets the video going, the plot approximated in pastiche, the tone strange and dark and exuberant. *This* is who she is, is what she's trying to say; she just wants to be able to say it. Less talk, more rock.

So I turn my tape recorder off. We swill some more Coors. The Los Feliz skyline darkens. Eventually Meyer texts to see what's up, and we head to a dive bar a few minutes down the road where we sit at a booth and eat chicken wings and where not a single person approaches the table except the woman who takes our order. Stewart sits close to Meyer, who does most of the talking (about books, about writing, about how these are the best wings in Los Angeles to such an extent that "I'm not interested in other wings anymore"). Periodically, Stewart reaches out to gently touch Meyer's neck. At one point, they go outside to split the joint that's been hanging out behind Stewart's ear and return smiling and chummy. When the wings are done and the beers are finished, I call a car, and they wait outside with me until it arrives. They give good hugs, both of them.

Before we part ways for the final time, Stewart asks me again if I know what I'll write about her, which of course I don't. She's right: We've set ourselves up for failure with this whole cover-story thing. Identity is so fucking malleable, a series of choices made over and over again in service to something elusive. It can take so much strength to drown out all the noise and get to the point where you know how to make those choices in a way that feels true. So, yeah, I guess what I have to say is this: Kristen Stewart is strong as fuck — whatever the fuck that means. ®

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# they don't call him king for no reason

## Veracity, talent, strategic moves and everything in between

**BY PEONY HIRWANI**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGHAN KATTI**

In the labyrinth of the music world, authenticity often stands as a rare gem amid the sea of meticulously constructed facades. As a music journalist navigating this landscape, encounters with artists range from the awe-inspiring to the disappointingly contrived. Yet, amid this dynamic spectrum, emerges King—a 28-year-old superstar from Delhi who's managed to defy the norm with his raw, unfiltered demeanor, setting a new standard for authenticity in the Indian music scene.

"I come from a lower-middle-class background in Delhi," says King, born Arpan Kumar Chandel. "I was raised in an environment where street smarts are paramount. I've learned various tricks of the trade (jugaad), and it's precisely what has influenced my art."

Stepping into Rolling Stone India's Mumbai headquarters for his cover shoot last month, King sported a simple white t-shirt, jeans, and Crocs, accompanied by his faithful entourage of four. His unfiltered candor shone through as he openly shared his thoughts, showing a level of realness found in an industry known for its carefully crafted images. Despite his rising status in the entertainment industry, King remained refreshingly down-to-earth as he mingled with the crew and chatted with the creative team. It became evident that his humility was as genuine as his talent. He cracked jokes, shared anecdotes from his life, and displayed an earnest interest in the people around him.

As he settled into the studio and connected his phone to the speaker, it became evident how deeply intertwined music, and especially Indian cultural elements, hold significance for him. While he didn't shy away from playing his international favorites by A$AP Rocky and Ye (Kanye West), King's playlist struck a perfect balance between local music and international hits. "Our Indian music is incredibly rich," the "Maan Meri Jaan" singer said. "I approach my music with the intention of leveraging the cultural wealth we have at home to inform and shape my compositions." Although, one aspect that King was firm about is his aversion to the use of slang in songs. "I strongly disagree with incorporating slang into lyrics," he remarked candidly. "I find it to be in poor taste."

TROUSERS & SHIRT: DIESEL
JACKET & HAT: THE AESTHETIC OF RESISTANCE
SHOES: CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN
SCARF: JACK & JONES
JEWELLERY: HERMES

FULL LOOK:
THE AESTHETIC
OF RESISTANCE

King's meteoric rise in the Indian music scene has been beyond commendable. Boasting over 10 million monthly listeners on Spotify and international hits such as "Maan Meri Jaan (Afterlife)" ft Nick Jonas and "Tu Aake Dekhle," the rising star asserts he's merely at the threshold of his journey. "My dream is still far ahead. Everything I'm accomplishing now is just a steppingstone towards the ultimate dream." With that being said, King is now gearing up to release a new single featuring American singer-songwriter Jason Derulo in the coming weeks, followed by his highly anticipated studio album MM (the full form of which he's yet to reveal) expected to drop close to fall. "My fans are in for a surprise; Jason and I have crafted a track that will set the clubs on fire," King said. "I'm also working on material that aligns with my fans' expectations while also exploring new territories they'd never imagine I'd venture into."

Delving into the details of his forthcoming album, King expresses confidence that it will emerge as one of the most significant Desi hip-hop (DHH) albums if everything unfolds as planned. The "Tu Jaana Na Piya" vocalist discloses that the album features numerous collaborations, diverse sounds, and styles, presenting a completely new persona and viewpoint. "My aim with this album is to unite a variety of artists and enhance their authentic talents. I'm not seeking anything different from anyone; my sole objective is to bring out their skills," he says. "This project will stand as a substantial catalog of collaborations in the history of the Indian music industry," King promises.

Outside of his music career, King is simply a regular, practical guy. He enjoys spending time with his close friends, whom he affectionately refers to as his "day ones," and just being himself. "It's quite straightforward," he explains. "When I'm out in public, I'm King—I'm in my rockstar mode. But when I'm at home, you wouldn't even recognize me as the same person." King clarifies that he doesn't undergo a complete transformation; rather, he values the simple things in life. "I don't throw extravagant parties at home. Instead, I prefer to invite my friends over, and we just hang out like we've been doing for the past decade."

Maintaining a clear boundary between his professional and personal life is crucial for the singer-songwriter, ensuring that he doesn't carry work-related emotions into his personal space or vice versa. "The dynamics are very different outside," he notes. "Interactions in public settings often have a transactional nature." While he doesn't view this transactional nature of interactions negatively, King is adamant about separating his emotions from his professional endeavors. "This boundary is essential for preserving my sanity."

When asked about any particular firsthand experiences and emotions that have significantly influenced his craft and artistic expression, King had intriguing—rather relatable—things to say. "Consider the experiences of someone from a lower-middle-class background," he began. "There's often a scarcity of financial resources, coupled with perhaps not fitting conventional beauty standards, which can lead to being overlooked in society. Confidence may wane, and opportunities to indulge in extravagant experiences are limited due to strict budgetary constraints. Plans frequently fall through due to financial limitations, and truthfully, I didn't have the chance to explore even a fraction of what the world has to offer back then."

Reflecting on his journey, King acknowledges that he found everything he yearned for, after attaining recognition. "And I got bored, man," he chuckled. "[For instance,] I used to fret over why I couldn't frequent lavish clubs before. However, when I finally had the chance, I realized how superficial it all felt." He realized that such environments weren't his vibe and that his life before stardom offered everything he needed. After becoming rich and famous, "I realized that the simple things I had before are the epitome of luxury; everything else is just material and can be bought."

**“My aim with my new album is to unite a variety of artists and enhance their authentic talents. I’m not seeking anything different from anyone; my sole objective is to bring out their skills. This project will stand as a substantial catalog of collaborations in the history of the Indian music industry.”**

TROUSERS: HERMES

BRACELET: HERMES
NECKLACE: INOX

**“I want the future of music to be excellent, irrespective of who leads the charge—be it King, Badshah, my brother AP [Dhillon], Shubh, or Karan [Aujla]. It should be exemplary, you know.”**

King possesses strategic acumen and intelligence. He avoids actions that he believes could result in unfavorable outcomes in the future. “I carefully plan my steps,” he explains. “I meticulously consider the implications of my decisions.” His strategic mindset is particularly evident in his career trajectory. Achieving viral hits, selling out shows, and managing all the responsibilities that come with his success are formidable challenges for a young music artist. Yet, King navigates these hurdles with apparent ease, highlighting his adept thinking.

The artist’s strategic acumen not only applies to his personal career but extends to his broader vision for the music industry. Throughout our conversation, one aspect stood out prominently: King’s genuine concern for the music industry and the emerging talents in India. He is driven by a desire to break monotony, to explore new avenues, and to uplift his fellow artists. His aspiration extends beyond personal success; he envisions a future where Indian artists thrive on the global stage. For him, it’s not about individual recognition but about ensuring that the quality of music remains paramount. As he puts it, “I want the future of music to be excellent, irrespective of who leads the charge—be it King, Badshah, my brother AP [Dhillon], Shubh, or Karan [Aujla]. It should be exemplary, you know.”

In light of these insights, it’s apparent that genuine greatness in an artist isn’t solely measured by awards or recognition but by the authentic impact they have on the world. Here’s to King’s enduring legacy and the ongoing evolution of his career. May he continue to reign supreme, and may his journey be filled with endless growth and success. ®

# anuv jain

## The shy wunderkind from Ludhiana turned into a chart-topping sensation

***By*** **Peony Hirwani**

As THE FUTURE of music in India, Anuv Jain's journey from humble beginnings to topping the charts exemplifies the burgeoning talent and potential within the Indian music industry.

In an exclusive interview with Rolling Stone India, Anuv reflects on his unexpected rise to prominence, the influences shaping his distinctive sound and his vision for the future of music in India. From his early days as a shy yet ambitious student to transitioning into a full-time music career during the COVID-19 pandemic, Anuv's story is one of resilience, passion, and unwavering dedication to his craft. Join us as we delve into the life and music of Anuv Jain, a rising star poised to make a significant impact on the global music scene.

***Rolling Stone India:*** **Anuv, let's take a trip down memory lane. Did you imagine you would be here right now?**

**Anuv Jain:** Honestly, no. Music was always a passion of mine; even back in school, I played guitar and wrote songs. But it was more of a hobby to me. I never actively pursued it as a career. However, things unfolded unexpectedly, and I'm grateful beyond words for where I am now.

**How did your journey as a musician unfold?**

I've always been shy but highly motivated. Whether it was sports or academics, I excelled. Music was no exception. I was a diligent student, always respectful to my teachers, perhaps even a bit of a teacher's pet. This demeanor served me well. Despite my shyness, I always harbored a deep love for music. In college, I met people who encouraged me to break out of my shell, leading me to record my music. "Barishem," a song I wrote at 16, was eventually recorded when I turned 21. It felt like the right time, both

"I BELIEVE INDIA WILL PRODUCE INTERNATIONAL STARS SOON. IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT MY MUSIC BUT ABOUT THE ENTIRE MUSIC SCENE IN THE COUNTRY. WE'RE ON OUR WAY, AND I BELIEVE WE'LL REACH THE TOP VERY SOON."

COURTESY OF ARTIST

vocally and musically. Posting it on Soundcloud and later on YouTube marked the beginning of a gradual but steady rise. While I've become more confident over time, that shy yet motivated kid still resides within me, striving for excellence in everything I do.

**You transitioned into a full-time music career during the COVID-19 pandemic, right? That must have its own set of challenges. What motivated you to take this leap back then?**
So, what happened was that I spent three years working in the family business in Ludhiana, where we had several factories. Unfortunately, my father passed away earlier, and some family members were managing the business, but due to certain issues, it didn't work out.

Coincidentally, around the time of the COVID-19 lockdown, I decided to leave my job. I felt it wasn't working out properly, and simultaneously, Spotify launched in India, leading to a surge in music streaming popularity. It was during this period that my music started gaining traction again in 2019-20. Leaving my corporate job felt like the right decision as I was passionate about music, and I received appreciation for it, which I didn't necessarily get in the family business. The timing aligned well with the lockdown, which boosted independent music's popularity, ultimately propelling my career forward. It felt like I caught the wave at the right moment.

**Your music often deals with themes of love and heartbreak. What draws you to explore these emotions in your songs?**
All of my songwriting is deeply rooted in personal experiences, either from my own life or from those close to me. I often emphasize this during my shows because there's sometimes speculation that the stories might be fabricated, but every word is authentically derived from real-life events or emotions. While I had a generally happy childhood, like everyone, I've also experienced moments of sadness, which I believe are universal. I've developed a knack for introspection, allowing me to channel these emotions into my music, particularly in crafting lyrics with depth and emotional resonance.

**Many of your compositions feature only a guitar or ukulele, creating an intimate atmosphere. What led you to choose this minimalist approach?**
Regarding the choice of instruments like the guitar or ukulele in many of my compositions, it's a combination of factors. Firstly, I'm not formally trained in music theory, but I excel in songwriting and composing melodies. Since I'm proficient in playing the guitar and have some knowledge of the ukulele, these instruments naturally became my primary tools for composition. Additionally, during the recording of my song "Barishein" at the age of 21, it was serendipitous that these instruments were readily available and suited the intimate

atmosphere I aimed to create.In fact, at the time, I didn't have any budget at all, absolutely zero. I was essentially a "make-do" kind of person. So, I recorded the song for free, which turned out to be the best investment I ever made because it has yielded incredible returns.

However, due to financial constraints, I couldn't afford to include many instruments in the recording. If you listen to it now, you'll notice it's quite minimal, with just a shaker and keys, as that's all I had access to. They offered to add more instruments for a fee, but being a broke college student, I couldn't afford it. Coincidentally, I decided to release it anyway because I believed in its quality. I had always planned to wait until I had more money to invest in music production. Surprisingly, people appreciated the stripped-down storytelling approach. That became my signature style, and I embraced it because it allows the focus to remain on the songwriting rather than being overshadowed by elaborate instrumentation.

**Your 2023 track, "Husn", also topped the charts, reaching number one on platforms like Apple Music and Spotify. How do you feel about the overwhelming response, not just to one track, but multiple ones now?**
"Husn" quickly rose to become the number-one song nationwide on both Spotify and Apple Music. It also held the top spot in Pakistan for a significant period. This achievement is particularly noteworthy because "Husn" was independently released, without any substantial marketing budget or promotional efforts, aside from a few reels I shared.

Many industry insiders have remarked on the rarity of an independent song reaching such

heights. Personally, I approached this song with a level of confidence unlike any before, as it's one of my personal favorites among my compositions. However, even with this confidence, I never anticipated it would reach number one. It's a remarkable feat, and I'm thrilled beyond words. I imagine I'll still be talking about it when I'm 60, reminiscing about having had a number-one song in India. It's truly surreal, and I'm incredibly grateful for this opportunity.

Are there any artists, Indian or international, who have had a significant influence on your musical style?

**Have there been any local or international artists who've had a significant impact on your musical style?**

While there may be artists out there on a similar path, I haven't consciously tried to replicate anyone's style. However, listening to some artists early on in my life definitely left a mark on me.

I began with a lot of Backstreet Boys, like many others, and fell in love with their music. Even now, I occasionally listen to them for nostalgia's sake. Then, I delved into Linkin Park, which led me to start writing those emo, teenage songs. Of course, I've never released them and probably never will, but that's how I first got into songwriting, expressing those angsty feelings like 'crawling in my skin.'

Eventually, I discovered a lot of Indian music, including the brilliance of artists like A.R. Rahman and Mohit Chauhan from the movie Rockstar. Their music deeply impacted me. And then there was Ed Sheeran, whose music blew my mind. I even attended one of his concerts, where I wrote down my wish to someday perform on stage with just a guitar. Now, I've actually manifested that dream. So, while these artists have certainly influenced my music, I've always aimed to stay true to my own unique style rather than imitate anyone else's.

**What's next for Anuv Jain? Is anything interesting in the pipeline?**

There's a lot in the pipeline. This year has been all about international performances, and we recently wrapped up a tour in the UK. The next big thing on the agenda is the Australia tour, which I just announced. It's happening in the next month, covering Australia and New Zealand. Our focus has been on expanding globally, mirroring the way we built our base in India. It's a gradual process, but I'm patient and excited about the journey.

In addition to touring, I have several new singles in the works. Despite a busy schedule with shows, I've begun working on new music. It's progressing a bit slowly due to the constant traveling, but I'm determined to bring some fresh ideas to life. And of course, an EP has always been on my mind. Hopefully, I'll find some downtime soon to focus on that.



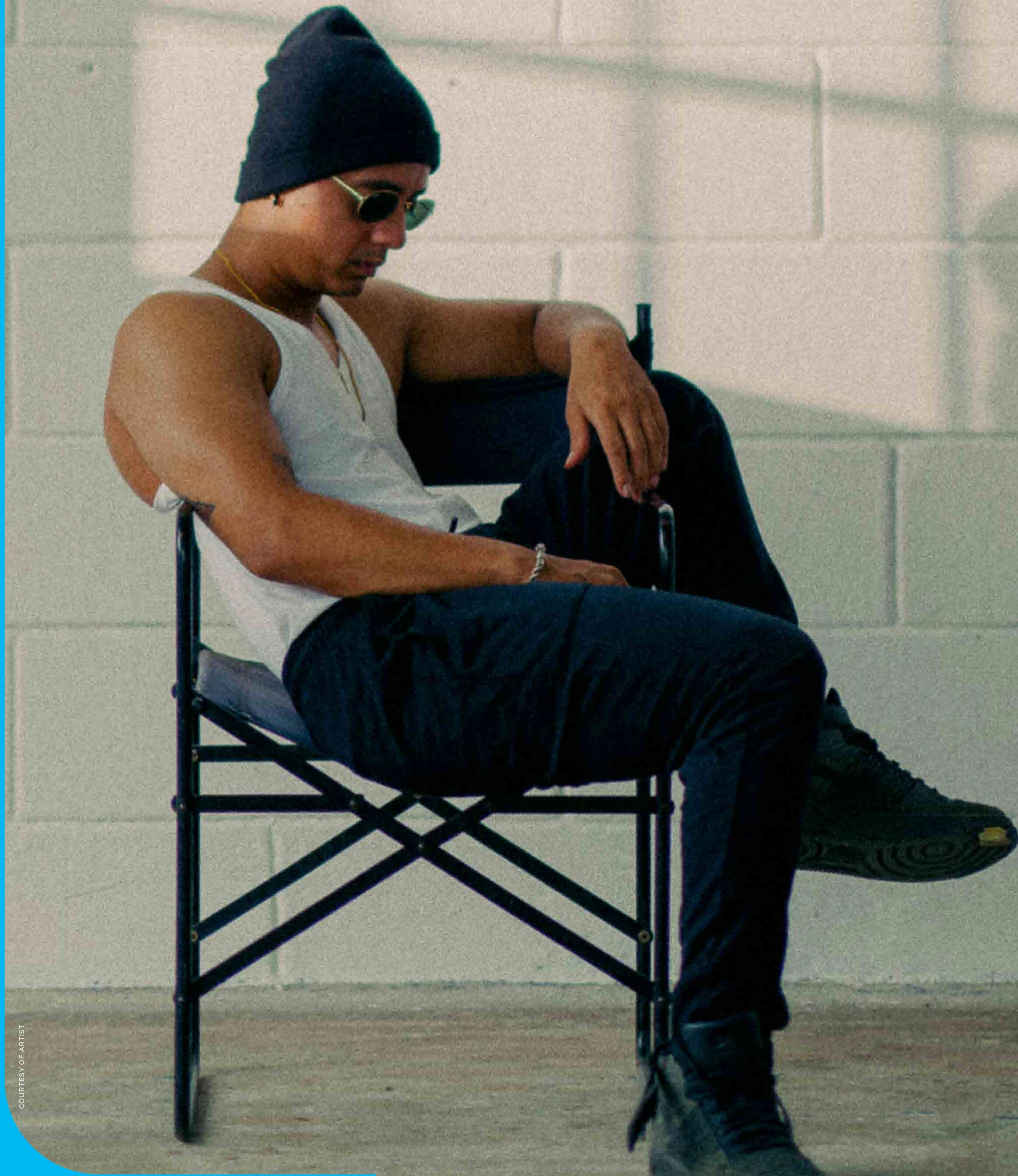
**I might be asking all the artists featured in this campaign - what gives you hope about the future of music in India and what worries you about it?**

What gives me hope is the emergence of so many talented artists. I see the right kind of music being promoted, with beautiful songs making it to the top of the charts. It's reassuring to know that people are embracing quality music. However, what worries me is the risk of burnout among artists. With the rise of social media, artists feel pressured to constantly churn out content, which can be detrimental to creativity and mental health.

I come from the belief that overexposure isn't beneficial, but unfortunately, it seems to be the norm dictated by algorithms. I hope audiences understand that artists need time to create quality music, and we can't rush the process. Another concern is the lack of support at times. As artists grow, they face skepticism and criticism, which can hinder their progress. It's disheartening to see this happening, especially in our country where we should be supporting and encouraging each other. I believe both these issues can be addressed through better education and understanding from audiences.

**As a leading new upcoming artist in India, what's your message for the world?**

My message would be that Indian music is poised to become the next big thing. We're aiming to make our mark in the UK and then the US. I believe our country will produce international stars soon. It's not just about my music but about the entire music scene in India. We're on our way, and I believe we'll reach the top very soon. There's immense talent here waiting to be discovered, and I'm confident we'll make waves on the global stage.



COURTESY OF ARTIST

# Hanumankind

## The Bengaluru-based rapper talks about the work he's putting into his upcoming debut album and how corporatization in music can be a worry

***By* Anurag Tagat**

WHEN HANUMANKIND came in hot with his song "Southside" in 2019, off the EP *Kalari*, it became an anthem for South Indians not just in the country, but around the world. Songs of resilience like "Genghis" and "DAMNSON" made Hanumankind aka Sooraj Cherukat the rapper who tells it like it is.

For that, he's cemented his reputation in Indian hip-hop as one of the few prolific English-language rappers to blow up in recent times. Whether it's acerbic takedowns of authority or introspective vulnerabilities, Hanumankind has flexed his pen game and then proceeded to get down into the moshpit when his favorite artists are playing. Over the years, the rapper says he's gained a stronger sense of purpose, one that he's channeling into his upcoming debut album.

In an interview with Rolling Stone India, Hanumankind talks about the journey so far, new material and clears up the different ways his moniker can be pronounced (Hanuman-kind or Hanu-mankind).

***Rolling Stone India*: You've had singles and a couple of EPs come out. Has an album been on your mind?**

**Hanumankind:** An album has definitely been on my mind. The album has actually been the only thing on my mind right now. I've been on that headspace. That's why I haven't released music in a bit, because I took a step back when I dove into the idea of doing more than just one song, putting together a sequence of emotions, a sequence of perspectives, and creating an album, which is more than just a quick two to three minutes.

I've definitely taken some time in order to do this because the last actual release that I had was 'Go To Sleep,' everything else had been features and collaborations popping up here and there.

When I initially got into making the whole album, I think it required me to take a step back and really do some deep diving into myself as well as the art and in accordance to that, it kind of shapes up. It's been eventful, to say the least. It's still being finalized, but there will be 10 to 15 tracks. That's an ideal number.

**You got to link up with JPEGMAFIA, Kenny Beats, YG and a few others when they came down to India. What was that like?**

In a way, I think things like that... it just gives me perspective. Because in the end, everybody's just their people, bro. They're just human, too. We have this perspective of people being like, 'Oh, my God, man.' The music is larger than life and so also the person, that there's got to be something special going on. But in the end, it's just people and their desire, their drive to make something of themselves and be better on a daily basis.

**If anything, it inspires you more just because of the common ground that you are able to see firsthand, you know what I mean? And I think that's a beautiful thing.**

**Is that something you carry forward when people come up to you after the show, but they might be intimidated by how they saw you on stage?**

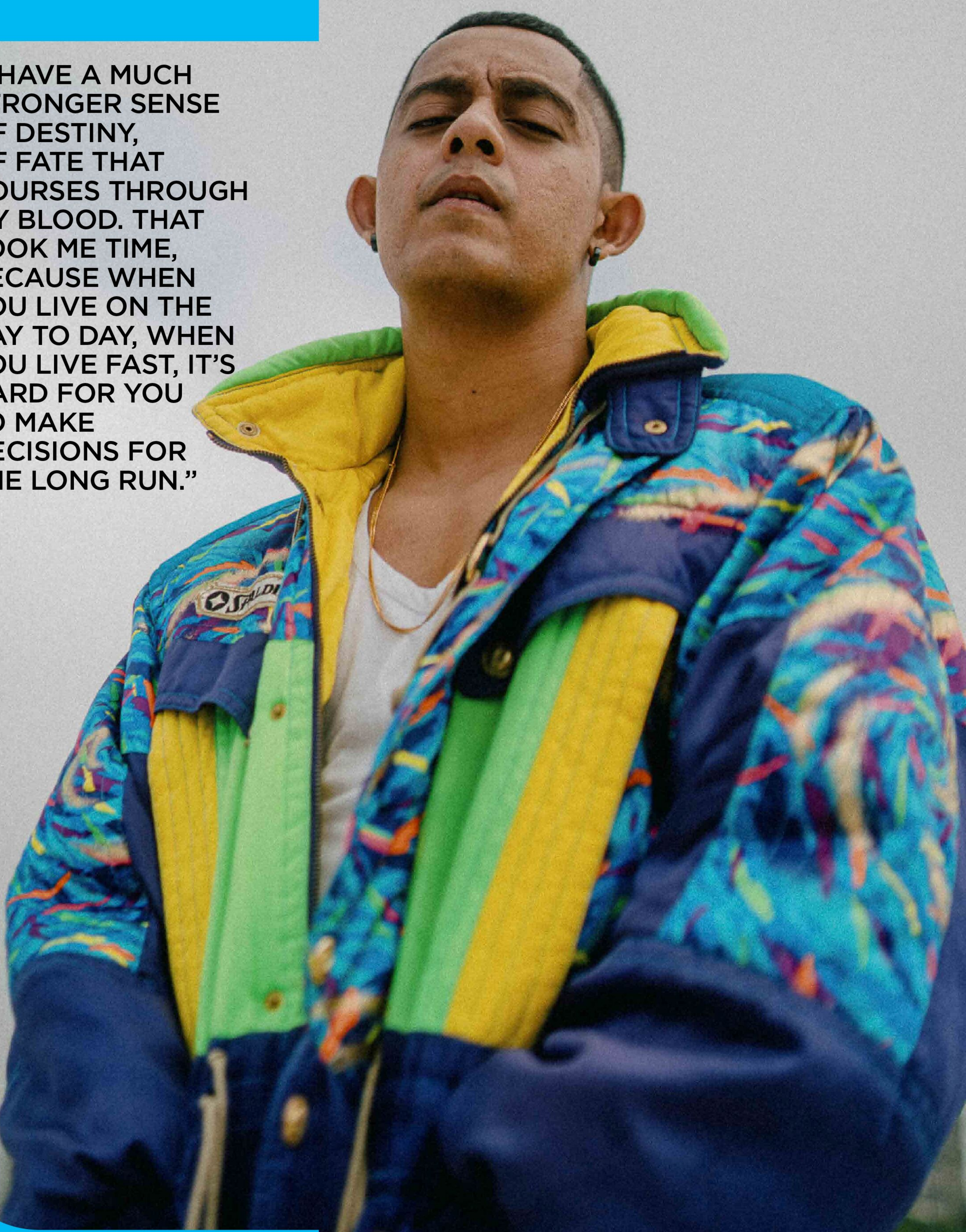
Yes, absolutely. I think you've seen this, too. Go have a regular conversation with people. Let them know how much of an idiot I can be myself. And ain't nobody immune to anything, right? We're all susceptible to the same range of emotions and ups and downs that life throws at you.

**The world always first knew you as Hanumankind and then maybe got to know your real name. At the start, you were also doing different things, outside of music. When did you get secure about your identity as Hanumankind? Was it a day one thing?**

No, man. Look, if there's anything that I can attest to is that you can't be sure of anything. Life is super unpredictable, and you have to come to terms with the fact that change is the only constant and that there's always... no one can be so sure of what's going on to where it can't be taken away from you, especially the way that I live and the experiences that I've been able to see.

So to come to terms with or be comfortable with my identity, it's a process. It's still a process, man. I still don't know. There's still more for me to learn. There's still more for me to pick up and feel, but I have definitely become more comfortable with the idea of it. I have a stronger sense of my purpose and what I'm supposed to do in life. I have a much stronger sense of destiny, of fate that courses through my blood. That took me time, because when you live on the day to day, when you live fast, it's hard for you to make decisions for the long run.

“I HAVE A MUCH STRONGER SENSE OF DESTINY, OF FATE THAT COURSES THROUGH MY BLOOD. THAT TOOK ME TIME, BECAUSE WHEN YOU LIVE ON THE DAY TO DAY, WHEN YOU LIVE FAST, IT’S HARD FOR YOU TO MAKE DECISIONS FOR THE LONG RUN.”



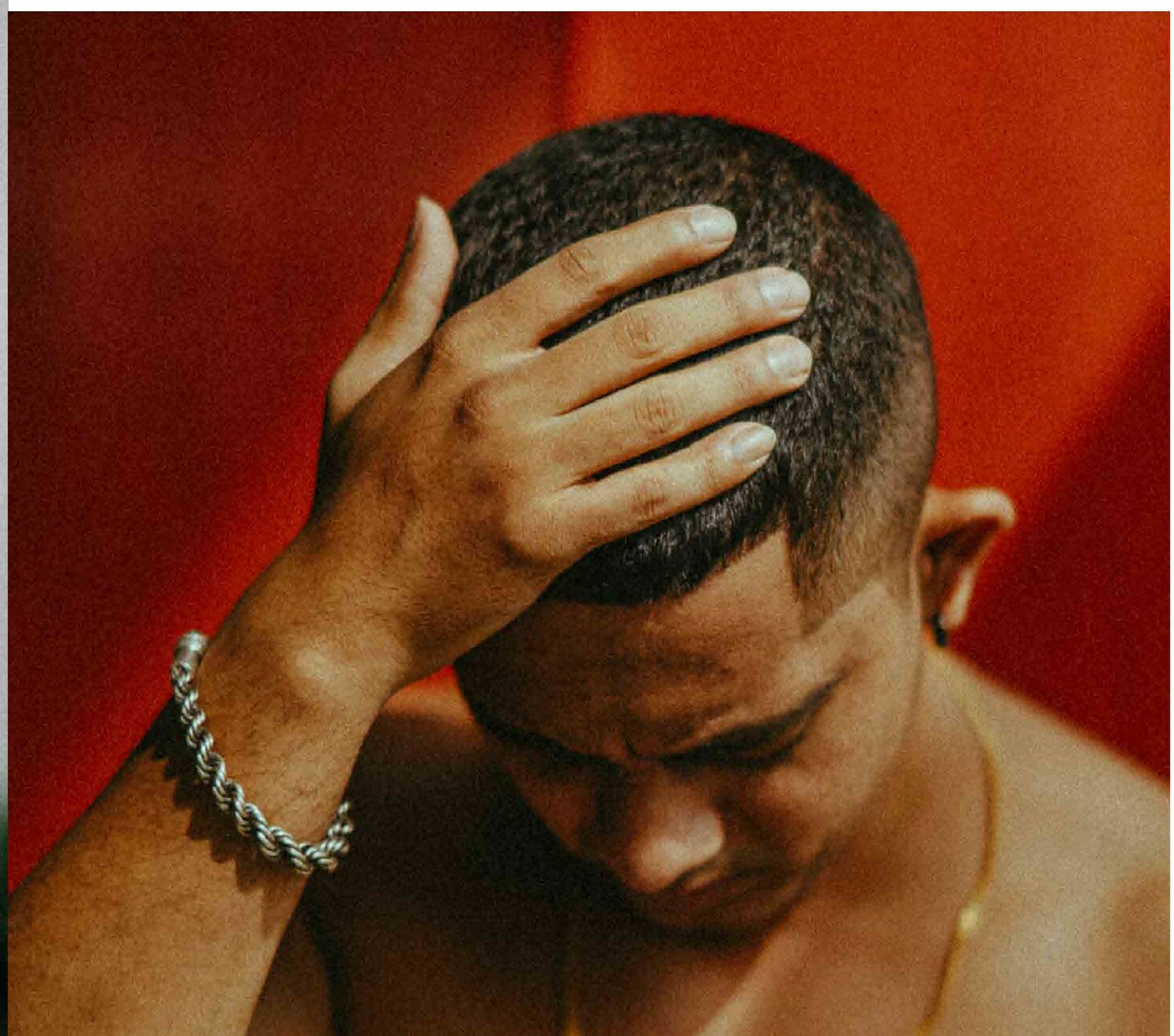
I'm not gonna shy away from the fact that I live fucking fast. I like fast shit. So when you live for the moment, things become momentary. I do think that me getting comfortable with it was also me being like, 'Hey, man, let's try and build something that lasts.' And if you're doing that same thing, it ties in with the album.

**As I was saying it, I was thinking about how some people pronounce Hanumankind in different ways. What do you think about that?**
I mean, it's cool, bro. Hanuman is a powerful entity in itself. And I think Hanuman symbolizes a lot of stuff that people can agree to. They symbolize something that people would strive to also have within their lives, like honor and loyalty and power and courage. So these things, when they say Hanuman-kind, it's absolutely fine with me. It's one and the same. Again, there's a difference when people are saying it in a bad way, in a good way, you know what I mean? [laughs]

**Have you been accused to being blasphemous because of it?**
Yeah, man. India is a sensitive place. They got some sensitive people. I think it comes with the territory, especially when you say things, when you try and make statements. I want to bring change to the world, but not everyone likes change. People enjoy their comfort of what they know and what they're accustomed to.

**"Go To Sleep" explored this inner turmoil and showed this vulnerable side to you. What kind of stuff are you writing about now that maybe you didn't have the confidence or willingness to explore before?**
That's a good question. I think I was just able to see [that] when you do something as direct, it's rap and hip-hop. Now, when I mean direct, it's poetry, right? A lot of music conveys emotions [but] they limit the words or they limit the elements that are in it... it's different. Rap and hip-hop, you can elaborate on how you feel. You can really get down into the nitty-gritties and conversations through your words. So I think I've been just able to explore really getting into some topics that people don't necessarily talk about.

'Go To Sleep' was just brushing on the surface. It's just what people see on the outside. But a lot of what we deal with on the inside is stuff that I've been tapping into while also coming to terms with the person that you are, the flaws that you hold and also the journey that you've gone on and how far you've come and trying to find that to relate to everybody. I think that's important because I love making random shit and also just having fun. But I do want to be able to relate to people, because there's this emotion that, if you manage to tap it, it really creates a beautiful connection between people. So that's what I've been working on and trying to get a hold of.





**It's like they say, no man is an island.**
I mean, I could definitely say I did a lot of vacationing on islands, man. I was islanding for a while, but I feel better now. I feel more connected.

**You're not just at rap gigs, but you go to rock and metal gigs too and the electronic ones. What do you take from different genres and put into your own music?**
Honestly, anything I like. Ever since I was a child, I was traveling and I never really stayed at one place for too long. That allowed me just to find a bunch of shit that I like and have a bunch of tastes that overall I picked up over time. And I think that's also very relatable in terms of how I perceive music and art in general. If I like it, I'm not going to be like, 'Oh, man, but it's not hip-hop. Oh, shit. It doesn't fit into the category of the theme' or whatever the fuck.

If I like how these drum and bass hits makes me feel a certain way, I'll see if there's something I can do with it. If not, maybe for another time. And metal? I grew up listening to it in middle school. I'm just like, any moment that I can find the right place, I do want to be able to tap into that little boy that was full of angst trying to cruise through life on a skateboard. But I do understand also that there's a time and place for things. I've come to realize you can't just throw everything at everyone all at once because it can confuse people, man.

**What excites you and what worries you about the future of music?**
What excites me is that I think at this day and age, anyone can make music anytime. There's also such acceptability to bending styles and not conforming to one particular space. So we're at a point where there's a lot of evolution that's happening and I think that's going to produce a lot of really cool stuff.

Also the fact that people are becoming more aware of their capacities within the current online and creative diaspora. The people are realizing what they can do, what they're entitled to, what they shouldn't overthink. It's just accessible.

What worries me? Everything just becoming more corporatized. You know what I mean? I've heard things about major corporations and large entities that are coming and looking into buying just monopolizing music, right? Which I do understand the pull of money, because when artists or companies are offered large sums of money, it feels good in that moment and they make momentary decisions.

That sometimes worries me, because you can see that overall, everything is becoming, you see bigger and bigger entities that tend to swallow up entire ecosystems. It puts a restriction on so many things.

# Keyed in

## The bass maverick and composer on the common ground between fashion and music, plus the move to Nashville

***By* Anurag Tagat**

futures 25

MOHINI DEY has steadily become one of the most recognized Indian bass players globally and it's something she's worked on right from when she was a nine-year-old. When she was pretty much trained by her father – the late Sujoy Dey – in bass, acclaim and recognition came in her adolescence and teenage years itself. Dey had played for everyone from Zakir Hussain to Ranjit Barot (a formative mentor) and A.R. Rahman.

Even now at 27, what could be considered a lifetime's worth of achievements are in Dey's resumé – she's performed with guitar greats like Steve Vai and Guthrie Govan, (finally) released her solo self-titled album and is now shuttling between Nashville and Mumbai with saxophonist (and husband) Mark Hartsuch as she puts down new roots in the U.S.

**As a young artist who started out when she was even younger, what continued to draw you to music even as your other interests grew, like fashion designing?**
I think the aspect and creation, the whole process of creating and ideating something is what drew me to music over time. Music was not my first choice, fashion designing was. I think I found a similarity between fashion designing and music, because both have the creation tie up and this designing aspect that links them.

I think that's why I ended up really enjoying music because I love the process of making music, I love getting together with people and writing music, coming up with different sounds and fusing that with other things. It's the same thing with fashion – I will take different fabrics from like saris and embroidery and I'll just patch them up together. There's some interesting fusion that happens.

I've always loved music. It's just not something I wanted to pursue as a profession. But I'm glad now that I did that. My dad made that happen for me, he taught me music. And now, my music career is fueling my fashion goals.

**You've had different claims to global acclaim over the years – from playing with AR Rahman to Steve Vai to now having MaMoGi. So what prompted the solo self-titled album? Was it in the works for a while?**
Yes, it was in the works for a while. In fact, I wrote my first song when I was 13 years old. The first song I wrote was 'Introverted Soul.'

I was always writing my own music and I wanted to get it out there. But, I was prioritizing other people's work, because, of course, money is important for everybody. I couldn't turn down anything at that point of time. But there was a turning point in my life where I could say no, and that's when I started prioritizing myself.

Now with MaMoGi with Mark Hartsuch and Gino Banks as well as with my solo stuff, we tour the world. I'm actually playing Billboard Live Japan, Tokyo and Osaka with my solo album. I'm really excited about that. I'm also touring with [American guitarist-composer] Greg Howe, in October-November, and I'm touring with a really interesting artist that I cannot take the name of right now for two months, April and May in the U.S. and then I'm going to Brazil and later, Zurich to record an album with [drummer] Simon Phillips and [rock band] DarWin.

**I'm guessing outside of these formative mentors and guides in your life, you've often got unsolicited advice a lot – can you remember an early instance of that and how you dealt with it? How do you deal with it today?**
If I don't like something, and it doesn't sit well with me, I just kind of block it out. I don't give too much attention because I have other important things to deal with in life.

I've said this before, and I'll say it again. I feel like critics are everywhere and they're like, farts – they come and go. You don't really think about it too much.

**As someone who's always bending genres – you've done everything from rock to metal to fusion to funk and more – what kind of recent/newly flourishing music styles have drawn your interest and why?**
I always hated rock and metal music. I didn't listen to it growing up, but now lately, I've been writing rock and metal music, because maybe I've been getting hired a lot by rock and metal guitarists and keyboardists.

I actually in my downtime, I love listening to like Bruno Mars, Billie Eilish, sometimes Ariana Grande, Beyonce. I know a lot of people won't think of me [as someone who's] hearing this kind of music, but I do. It's good to be open to these kinds of music and I like keeping myself updated with times.

**You're moving to Nashville. What prompted it and how easy or difficult is it to setup shop? Even with all your credentials, would it seem on some level like starting from scratch?**
Oh, absolutely. You know, when you're moving from country to country, even from city to city, it's like starting from scratch. I really needed to start afresh, because after losing my dad, I was kind of losing it. My mind state wasn't the best. I was kind of powering through everything with work, I was keeping myself distracted with work. But I've had the time to process it.

You never really get over things, you're always gonna have these feelings of loss and grief. It's a process, it's gonna take some time, but I know that he's watching and he's proud.

Nashville is a music city. Mark [Hartsuch] and I always wanted to move to a place that's quiet. I'd taken a little break here and loved it.

**"I WANTED A HOME OF MY OWN LITTLE YARD AND A NICE HOME STUDIO, WHERE I CAN BE AROUND MUSICIANS THAT I WANT TO COLLABORATE WITH."**

We did try living in India, we have a home in Mumbai but the noise and pollution itself is a trigger for me. I just wanted to go to somewhere quiet, especially after losing dad, I just wanted some peace. And I wanted a higher standard of living.

I wanted a home of my own little yard and a nice home studio, where I can be around musicians that I want to collaborate with. I live very close to Victor Wooten. I live very close to Bela Fleck, I live very close to Billy Sheehan – these musicians are within a 20-minute radius from my home in Nashville. Who would have thought I would be able to say that? I never even dreamt about things like that. But yeah, life has its own plans.

My work in India is always there. I've done everything, played with everyone over 18 and a half years professionally. I'm partially living in Mumbai, and Nashville. So I travel back and forth a lot. I will be in Nashville for two-three months, and then I'll come back [to India]. But I will probably move to Nashville or someplace in the U.S. if my work opportunities completely need me to stay there.

**This one is something I may be asking all your artists featured in this campaign – what gives you hope about the future of music and what worries about the future of music?**

My hope about the future of music is that people hire people based on skill and not gender, I will say that.

My worry about the future of music is that because of advanced technology, we are forgetting to make music live. My worry is that people are going to start depending on technology so much that everything is going to be recorded from remote places and nobody's going to come together to record music live again. In a way, this is also a hope – I hope that people keep music alive by playing music live.

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# anoushka maskey

## Taking her "self-organized" Sunny Side Tour across the country, the Sikkim-origin artist is prioritizing consistent releases and exploring bossa nova next

***By* David Britto**



Mumbai/Sikkim singer-songwriter Anoushka Maskey's folk-inspired melodies and poignant storytelling has made waves across the country's independent music scene. Embracing a lyrics-first approach to her music, Maskey embarked on her journey in 2020 with the unveiling of two soul-stirring EPs, *Things I Saw in a Dream* and *C.E.A.S.E* in September, swiftly followed by the enchanting singles "September Embers" and "Empire of Fear" later that year. From being mentored by the likes of singer-songwriter and music supervisor Ankur Tewari, to sharing the stage with the likes of Prateek Kuhad on his 2021 winter tour, Maskey's has had quite the rise. And she's just getting started.

Read our interview with Maskey below:

**You're currently on tour, how has that been going?**

This self-organized tour has taught my team and I so much already. We started with a kickass show in Pune followed by the Mumbai leg, which was one for the books. We will be covering Delhi, Hyderabad, Chennai, Goa and a few other major cities from March through May. The tour includes fresh arrangements that range from that jazz-pop, bossa nova, indie rock, dream pop sonic space. I didn't realize how much I was missing out doing only solo and duo shows, because sharing the joy of a good gig with four other fellas on that same adrenaline has been such a magnifier of joy.

**What were your early years like?**

I think it took me some time before I started to feel like a real artist or musician, whatever that means. But my early years really began with home jam sessions with my brother on the guitar and me singing on top of my lungs. I believe there are some dangerously embarrassing home videos waiting to be dug out to support that claim. While I had always been dancing and singing on stage growing up, my journey as an artist really began during the first lockdown. The emotions I tried to navigate during my time of isolation while I was still living in Bengaluru are really what birthed the urge in me to truly become a musician. I was finally discovering a cohesion of the different forms of art I had always indulged in -- writing, singing, playing the guitar. My debut record Things I Saw in a Dream stands as a raw testimony of humble beginnings, with the entire album being recorded at home, using extremely limited resources and barely any solid skill. Having taken charge of all aspects of being an artist in today's world- creating, marketing, managing, filmmaking, to name a few, have all fed well the entrepreneurial bug in my belly.

**I first came across your work in 2020 -- how have the last four years in particular been for you, becoming quite a prominent name within the music scene in India?**

*Things I Saw in a Dream* still feels like yesterday. Bagging my first 10,000 streams on Spotify still feels fresh. Hearing from random strangers about how something I

made evokes a certain something in them is still equally a thrill and just as gratifying as when it first started happening in 2020. The past four years of coming into myself as a person and an artist have given me more than anything I would have envisioned for myself in life. I've grown from wondering why it is that people like our music and dismissing my own capabilities, to appreciating the things I create and approaching my misgivings and processes with grace. Or, at least, I'm on my way there. Experiences such as meeting listeners, engaging with artists not exclusive to musicians, gigging in a country outside of our own, having a team that believes in the same dream, have empowered me immensely over the years. I feel like I am finally shedding some of my conditioning and beginning to give myself credit when it's due. I truly believe we're on to some really great things, with no end in sight!

**You've been very consistent with your releases, is that something you put your success down to or is there more to it?**
To be honest, I don't believe I have been as consistent as I would like to have been, but I'm glad I kept attempting to be, year after year. Consistent releases is definitely a priority, and so I believe I might view it as a metric for growth in my musicianship. Putting music out consistently, or at least having them ready to go out, has also become a way of clearing the path for new sonic spaces I want to explore. I've had periods where I've become fixated on a certain project and it has created some sort of a mental block disallowing me to create new things. And so, avoiding that block is a conscious and constant effort.

**What are you currently working on and what does the rest of 2024 look like for you?**
I'm currently working to finish setting up the rest of the Sunny Side Tour, alongside finishing my EP, set to release mid-year. I believe it's some of my best work yet and I've loved how much I've discovered from it. I'm already itching to take it on the road. So much more in store for the year, from music to directing to even exploring the acting space.

**What according to you is the Future of Music?**
There is definitely a new wave of bossa nova and city pop that has been on my radar for some time now, and they happen to be spaces my team and I are exploring too. But I don't believe I am equipped with adequate knowledge to be able to answer this question. I do believe that the rigidity of 'genres' as a concept is already dissolving and people are creating art we have never consumed before. There are new artists everywhere pioneering new soundscapes and it's going to be quite the thrill bearing witness, as well as partaking! ®

COURTESY OF ARTIST

"I'LL SEE SOMEONE WHO'S HOLDING THAT [KAYAN SUPREMACY] SIGN UP AND THEY'LL BE SMILING AND IT MAKES MY DAY AND I'M LIKE 'OKAY, LET'S GO. I GOT THIS. I GOT YOU.'"

# kayan

## Between fandoms and aesthetic-setting live shows, artist Ambika Nayak talks about wanting to put out an album

***By* Anurag Tagat**

IF YOU WEREN'T yet familiar with the term 'Kayan Supremacy' you'll find it emblazoned on a phone screen that's raised up in the air during any of the Mumbai's artist's rager DJ sets. Crafting a set for the dancefloor has been one of Kayan aka Ambika Nayak's more recent pursuits. She started out in indie band Kimochi Youkai while also studying at True School of Music, all between 2016 and 2018.

Since then, there's been modeling, voiceover work, and acting that has helped Kayan thrive in different artistic formats – on stage, on screen and from the studio. Inspired by pop and R&B artists like Jorja Smith, Kali Uchis and more, Kayan stepped out into a more collab-heavy 2023 with rappers like Yashraj and Yung Raja, producer Karan Kanchan and pop artist AB!. She closed out the year with the openhearted "Plenty," one of her most vulnerable songs to date.

For all the wandering done last year – collaboration-wise, plus performing with her band at the Asia Song Festival in South Korea – Kayan is spending 2024 with a different kind of focus. Excerpts:

**Rolling Stone India: What has the past year been like with releases and gigs for you? What do you feel has sharpened for you as a skill?**

**Kayan:** I still feel like when it comes to the skill set of DJing or singing, it's just a never-ending practice. So I want to focus a lot more on both this year. I wasn't able to do that last year, because I was playing so much that when you're touring almost every weekend, it's hard to be in a headspace to just sit and write, even though I did try and I challenged myself. I did put out three songs and the songs are a lot more me than I think I have ever felt or sounded like before.

I'm doing focused gigs that I really, really want to play. I want to be on support for artists that I love when they come down here. I want to play gigs that I know that it's to going to be a room that's going to give me that energy that I live for, you know? That's why I started playing.

**Speaking of room full of energy, how did that whole thing start with people holding up their phones with the words 'KAYAN SUPREMACY'?**

[*Laughs*] I think it was that one show in Bangalore, where someone just held that sign up, and I posted it. It just caught on and it's the sweetest thing ever. Sometimes there are those off days, because every gig is not always that exciting and then someone will hold that sign up because I'm usually worried, 'Is everyone having a good time? Are they enjoying what I'm playing? Should I switch it up?'

I'll see someone who's holding that sign up and they'll be smiling and it makes my day and I'm like 'Okay, let's go. I got this. I got you.'

**People write different things too.**

It's easy to read because it's right there in my face. Sometimes they [fans] almost end up trying to have a conversation with me. I get asked out a lot by that thing on the phone. I've seen some really strange ones that are NSFW. It's funny, it's entertaining [*laughs*].

**What has it been like testing the waters in terms of different collaborations and what have you sought out of it?**

I feel like every song that I did as a collaboration, I tried to match the vibe of the artists that I was working with, and towards the end, like maybe with Karan Kanchan or Yashraj, I kind of had them make something that was not just trying to match the other person's vibe, but was a middle ground where I knew a kind of sound that I wanted to push, as well as take what makes space for what their vibe is.

I also realize that I can deliver so many different genres and but it felt a little bit all over the place to me, to be completely honest. And as a catalog, I do want it to be a little more streamlined now.

Now I feel like it's all kind of going into a soundscape that's a lot more me, that's a lot more detailed. I have a lot more control and say in everything that we're making. Initially, I started writing songs to beats because it was easier for me to find a beat and write to that and then maybe play around with the production a little bit. Now I'm working with really good producers and certain people. There's a solid team and we sit together and right from scratch.

**You performed in South Korea recently, at the Asia Song Festival. What was that experience like?**

I was interacting with an audience that was a completely Korean audience. I also tried speaking a little Korean in my set and I'm glad I did that, because it had a little bit of an impact. I don't think a lot of those people heard my music before.

I think overall as an experience, it was insane. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever experienced. The show was phenomenal. The artists I watched perform phenomenal. I wasn't I haven't really been I haven't been on the K-pop hype trend. It wasn't that for me, so I didn't know a lot about it. But my manager, who was traveling with me at that time, she is a huge K-pop fan. She also loves Korean culture, so she knew so much about the place and the people and everything.

It was really helpful to have someone who knew and that got me excited about everything. And I got to watch all these artists backstage who are ridiculously tight, like they know what they're doing. They practice like crazy and they can sing and they can dance and it was very exciting to just be in that space.

**Every Kayan Live set is heavy on curation, when it comes to your looks on stage to the songs and the band. What is it like taking it to different stages across the country and getting what you want out of it?**

I plan backwards and say, 'This is what I want to deliver.' I don't know how but I want to get this done. I have been lucky to have worked with amazing stylists over the last few years. A lot of them have helped me shape my style with Kayan Live. I wanted costumes to be tight. I wanted dancers, I wanted a performance that was an experience. We're still building on that. It was exciting because we worked with really cool indie brands and fashion houses.

Now when I think of Kayan Live, I see it a little differently. Definitely costumes will always be... my fits need to be... that's just my vibe. I've started enjoying styling myself a lot more. I've started doing my own hair and makeup, just because I enjoy it and I feel like I know what I want.

**A lot of artists present a persona on stage and through their music. Is there a difference between the persona Kayan and the person?**

That's such an interesting question, because I don't think there's a difference. I'm just me, I get on stage and I'm just me. I talk like me, maybe I sound a little bit more coherent [*laughs*]. I'm just me when I talk to an audience. I'm just me when I'm playing music. I feel like I get to be more me when I'm doing that, somehow. I've played a few shows where I've not justified what feels like me and I find it hard to make peace with it. But it's all part of the journey, I suppose.

**What's the one thing that excites you about the future of music and the one thing that worries you about the future of music?**

I think one thing that excites me about the future of music is how diverse everything is slowly getting, in the sense that people are a little less scared to experiment and do stuff that's not completely mainstream. I feel like there's a lot more pushing the boundaries now, there are more exciting sounds that are happening.

At the same time, my worry or a little concern could be the opposite of the above happening. There are forces who are much stronger and have more power to just keep something very mainstream, because at the end of the day, someone somewhere wants to make money off of the masses. If we don't introduce the masses to fresher things, how are they going to know that this exists? There's so much more than any one particular kind of music for everyone.



COURTESY OF ARTIST

# karan kanchan

The composer-producer moved out of the shadow of being just a beatmaker and is enjoying his time in the spotlight

***By* David Britto**

AT THE NEXUS OF INDIA'S burgeoning bass music scene and the pulsating heart of its hip-hop landscape stands Mumbai-based producer Karan Kanchan, a producer whose influence spreads wide. He first focused on "J-Trap" as an homage to his deep-seated admiration for Japanese culture, but Kanchan's journey into music's more diverse domains began when he met rapper Naezy in 2017.

Diving into India's thriving hip-hop scene ever since, it's not hyperbolic to say Kanchan's trajectory has been anything short of meteoric. Collaborating with hip-hop superstar DIVINE, joining Gully Gang Entertainment and delivering hits like "Baazigar" solidified his position as a linchpin in the Indian music scene.

There have been a few times Kanchan has got to flex his place in Indian music – from The Karan Kanchan Experience that gathered his favorite artists at Lollapalooza India 2024 to a star-studded Boiler Room set that was off the hook. From bass-heavy trap anthems that quake dancefloors (and break barriers at his Neckwreck gigs) to pop-leaning tunes for artists ranging from Ramya Pothuri to Armaan Malik, Kanchan has a whole lot of hustle in his veins.

Read our interview with Kanchan below:

**What got you interested in music production to begin with?**

In my family, everyone loves music. It was always around me, Kishore Kumar, Jagjit Singh or even the newer generation like the Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai movie soundtrack. Cut to when I was in school in the eighth or ninth grade and we had our vacations is when I used to spend a lot of time on the Internet. I would spend a lot of time on YouTube trying out new softwares. On YouTube, I came across this one recommendation which basically turned my entire career for me, and that was the first electronic music song I heard by Diplo and Tiësto, it was called 'C'Mon' in 2010. I was very much inspired by seeing one DJ on the stage and there's this large crowd of people. I couldn't understand what's happening because I've never seen something like that in India back then. I got curious about it, and I started searching online. Then I got to know you can make it on your laptop and you can use this software to create music. That's how I got into music in the first place.

**I'm interested to know about that Major Lazer concert you attended in 2015 and how it impacted you.**

In December 2015, I went to see Major Lazer and I reached at 4:00 PM in the evening. After the show ended is when I realized that all of these artists had their own sound, own presence, own visual identity and I was like, 'If I was on the stage, what would people take away from me?' So, on the train ride back home I was thinking that I need to find out what my sound is. So, I dedicated 2016 to completely search for my sound and discover more.

**You've collaborated with so many artists through the years, what do you think it is that makes so many artists want to work with you?**

After working on J-Trap music in 2017 and 2018, I got into hip-hop because of my college friend

who gave me a hip-hop sample pack. As soon as you get a new pack, you get really excited and you try to make something new and that same thing happened with me. I started making beats and [hip-hop DJ-producer] The Spindoctor heard it and he sent it to DIVINE and we got connected. Then DJ Proof got me connected with Naezy and Naezy also loved that beat. But Naezy said let's make a new song together and that's how 'Aane De' came out. It was my first hip-hop song and as a producer to have a first hip-hop song at that time with Naezy was a big deal. I'm able to understand the client's brief or the artist's brief much more easily now. I try to focus on building with artists. I have my producer hat on rather than an artist hat on. It's not about me trying to push what my vision is rather than it is like to collaboratively achieve a good song together.

**You recently posted about hitting one billion streams for the music you've worked on across platform. How does that make you feel that your music has reached such a wide audience?**
It's so unreal because that number and it's actually much bigger than that number also, because this is only Spotify and YouTube combined, so it doesn't consider Apple Music, Gaana and all the other things. So it might be a lot more than that. As an artist and producer, getting some recognition is a big deal because it was not the same couple of years ago. As a producer, you would have to struggle to create an identity between these big artists. I'm glad I'm working with artists who are open to celebrate the producer also, like DIVINE, Armaan Malik, KING, who's a producer himself. They're setting an example for the upcoming producers also and I'm glad we're able to create that space for the producers who are coming up next because it was not the same when I was trying to do it in the start and I'm glad that is changing.

**"I'M ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE ARTIST'S BRIEF MUCH MORE EASILY NOW. I TRY TO FOCUS ON BUILDING WITH ARTISTS. I HAVE MY PRODUCER HAT ON RATHER THAN AN ARTIST HAT ON. IT'S NOT ABOUT ME TRYING TO PUSH WHAT MY VISION IS RATHER THAN IT IS LIKE TO COLLABORATIVELY ACHIEVE A GOOD SONG TOGETHER."**

**What's a moment in your career that stands out?**
Playing Lollapalooza was definitely a big highlight for sure and the Boiler Room set which we did. It's funny because Indian festivals didn't give me a chance at the start, but I got a chance directly with Lollapalooza. So if you're not getting it now, maybe something better for you is in store. The main thing I learned in this industry was being patient. Other than that, going to this songwriting camp in London through Warner Music was also a really good experience.

**How is 2024 shaping up for you?**
Towards the end of the year last year, I got a chance to work with a lot of Bollywood artists like Vishal-Shekhar and Pritam and then I also got a chance to do my own Bollywood song ["Ishq Nachaawe" from *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan*]. Getting back to working on J-Trap music and go back to Japan once again is also my plan. I also have some independent releases with amazing artists and vocalists coming up too.

**What according to you is the future of music?**
I think now it's all about how good of a curator or sound selector you are, because making music has become very easy. It's all about how you get creative. Dropping hit after hit, it's okay but the only thing that would actually make a difference is on-ground impact or cultural impact. It's going to be more about involving yourself with your fan base and building a community around your music.

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# ranj x clifr

## The Bengaluru singer-composer and producer duo may not be done with hip-hop, but they are venturing into pop, R&B and Tamil songs next

## *By* David Britto

RANJ AND CLIFR, the Bengaluru-based singer-producer duo comprising Ranjani Ramadoss and Chlipher Christopher, have built an audience like few other independent artists. Their songwriting, characterized by grooves and hooks that draw from hip-hop, jazz and more, spawned hit tunes like "Attached" and a dynamic live set to boot. The duo effortlessly cover a spectrum of moods, often about the rules of attraction and elsewhere, about changing situations and perceptions with pop culture references just packed in. Their 2021 EP *593 Vol. 1*, a collaborative with producer Issamood aka Samudra Dasgupta, served as a beacon of positivity during challenging times, offering listeners a much-needed escape. At the heart of their collaborative projects lies a deep friendship and camaraderie, which shines through in their art.

Read our interview with RANJ and CLIFR below:

**You both have a wide variety of sounds, what was the kind of music both of you were exposed to growing up?**

**CLIFR:** I grew up in a Christian household, playing in church a lot and a lot of gospel music. I grew up in that kind of environment and developed. I also listened to a lot of rock and hip-hop and R&B music.

**RANJ:** My parents played a lot of A.R. Rahman and I did Carnatic music for several years but then I had a whole pop and R&B revolution finding out about artists like Beyoncé, and being like, 'Wow.'

**I recall coming across your music when the *593, Vol. 1* EP came out, how long were you both working together before that record came out?**

**RANJ:** We were writing before that, but we would just make these side songs and then the lockdown happened, and we weren't able to meet our band. So the three of us, CLIFR, Samudra and me were living in the same place and we all got COVID together. We were just like, let's just do something and were very inspired by all these Twitch streamers who would just stream non-stop. That's how we kind of began.

**What's the dynamic with the duo when it comes to songwriting?**

**CLIFR:** I start putting down some ideas and then I send it across and she puts down some ideas, and then I spend some time, or sometimes we just both sit and build that and certain songs take years to complete and certain songs are done in one session. So for each song, it's like a different way, whatever naturally comes through. And we can add horns with the live band and things like that. That's all a goal, to constantly play like that.

**What stands out for you so far in your career as artists?**

**CLIFR:** We played NH7 in March 2022 and the sun was killing us and we had an early slot. Our laptops died during the set so we couldn't even do soundcheck because of that. Somehow I swapped my keyboard laptop to the track laptop and played all my keyboard parts on the guitar on the spot. We just pushed through that set.

**RANJ:** Everyone there was so passionate and I feel like that kind of set hadn't really been done before in the indie space, so everyone was really excited about it.

**What do you have coming up this year?**

**CLIFR:** We have some singles in the bank and maybe some Tamil songs.

**RANJ:** Our last release was hip-hop and now we're going back into our pop and R&B space but with a whole different sonic identity.

**What according to you is the Future of Music?**

**CLIFR:** We don't know, honestly. We are in a very different time and age where trends pick up very quickly and then they die down and then something new comes out of what died down. I think live music is the future.

**RANJ:** Now things have changed so much, I feel like electronic music has a new boom. Maybe that will slowly shift back to the value that live music had in this country, especially.

"WE ARE IN A VERY DIFFERENT TIME AND AGE WHERE TRENDS PICK UP VERY QUICKLY AND THEN THEY DIE DOWN AND THEN SOMETHING NEW COMES OUT OF WHAT DIED DOWN."

COURTESY OF ARTIST

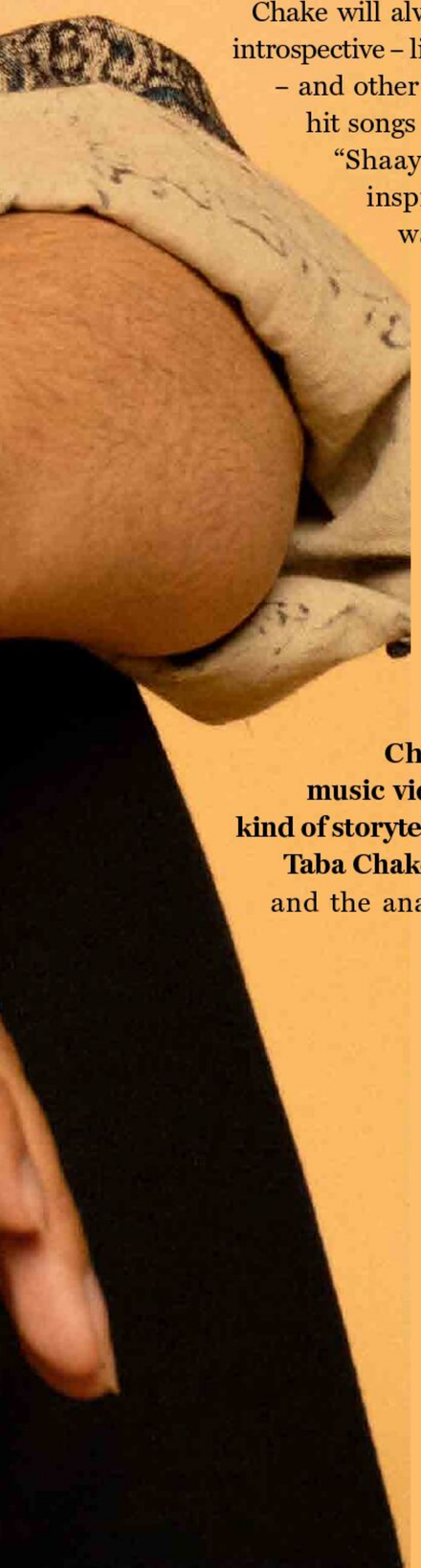
# taba chake

## The Arunachal Pradesh-based singer-songwriter discusses how his latest song "Kahani" reflects the power of love songs.

## *By* Anurag Tagat

IF YOU'RE about to watch Arunachal singer-songwriter Taba Chake's new video "Kahani," it's best to keep a tissue at hand. Based on a concept written by Chake and video director Bengia Morto, a story of an older couple looking back at their lives together strikes a chord when it comes to telling a love story like few others. It helps that Chake's lush indie-rock way with melodies and heartfelt Hindi lyrics are driving the visuals too.

Chake will always be a storyteller, sometimes introspective – like on his English song "Halfway" – and other times, a total romantic, like on hit songs "Udd Chala," "Aao Chalein" and "Shaayad." Then, there's the nature-inspired tunes, ones that go all the way back to his debut EP *Bond with Nature* in 2018. The artist speaks with us about where that romanticism and sense of yearning for another era comes from, the response for "Kahani" and what's coming up next.



***Rolling Stone India*: There's something to be said about how you're drawn to old-fashioned love stories with "Kahani" as well as "Udd Chala," especially with their music videos. What draws you to that kind of storytelling?**

**Taba Chake:** I really miss the analog world and the analog era. When I meet people nowadays, I'm not able to understand them, because of social media and how people interact there. I come from a different world, to be honest. Of course, Delhi or Bombay is not my birthplace. I come from Arunachal, where things are still little analog even today. That's in terms of everything – nature or hospitality or whatever. When I go to big cities, I miss the older days of how we used to meet and greet people.

Some may feel I'm a little old-school that way. I don't know if it's going in a good way or bad way. I have a lot of cassettes and stuff. The older I grow, I miss the olden times. The emotions and connection is something else back then.

**Does that also come from your roots as a fingerstyle guitarist and just someone who wrote and played music with strong basics in mind?**

In 2015 or 2016, before releasing *Bond With Nature*, I gave up music. I'd given music before also, for two years, because I didn't want to record or do anything. I used to go to performances and find that some performers didn't even play any instruments. I felt like, *humara zaroorat hi nahi hai* (we're not needed). I thought no one listens to acoustic music – that's why you still may not hear me play much acoustic even now. I'm not doing too much of that [*imitates percussive guitar taps*], because I felt all that was more action than sound. I felt like I was losing my focus on songwriting back then.

I think your music is now preserving those old-fashioned stories of love, like on "Kahani." A lot of people in the comments wrote about how they were crying when they were watching the video and hearing the song.

**When I was uploading the video, I was thinking to myself if we'd made something too cheesy or showing too much. But I did get confident about this video when I showed it to my dad and his driver. My dad's driver, he literally cried. My dad also got emotional while watching the video. My uncle's daughter also broke down. I'd rather show it to people who are not musicians for that initial feedback. That's when I thought, '*Yeh sahi video hai*.' (This is a great video). I made this concept with my cousin brother and it was for a love song, which is the easiest thing to do, you know?**

Love is such a thing that's everywhere. It comes from you and you don't have to dig too deep or overexplain anything. 'Walk With Me' was written in 10 minutes. 'Shaayad' took four to five months. 'Meri Dastaan' was written in 2012 and it was recorded in 2018 and released in 2019. If you tell me to write a love song even now, I can finish it in two minutes. I'm not saying it's easy, but when you think of love, there's so much to give.

**What do you think the North East and Arunachal Pradesh music ecosystem needs right now to keep it developing and nurturing new talent?**

My answer would maybe a little ulta (roundabout) here, at least for you to hear. I actually think the government and people are giving more than what is needed today. We're getting more than what we're meant to. There are so many festivals in Arunachal and the entire North East that I can't count. It's losing focus and it's changing very fast. Artists are doing shows everywhere, yes but when you do a lot of shows, you decrease the market.

Leave the market, the quality of the festivals seem to go down – there's no learning and only people quickly setting up, giving half an hour soundcheck to bands and then wrapping up.

So we're not ready for this. My friend and drummer Teji [Toko] – he's my best friend – he has one of the best studios in the entire North East but it's not functioning much. We're the only artists recording and performing there. No one is willing to pay what the studio is charging, which is based on the best gear it has.

The government is definitely helping everyone by giving funds, but when there are so many festivals, the quality goes down.

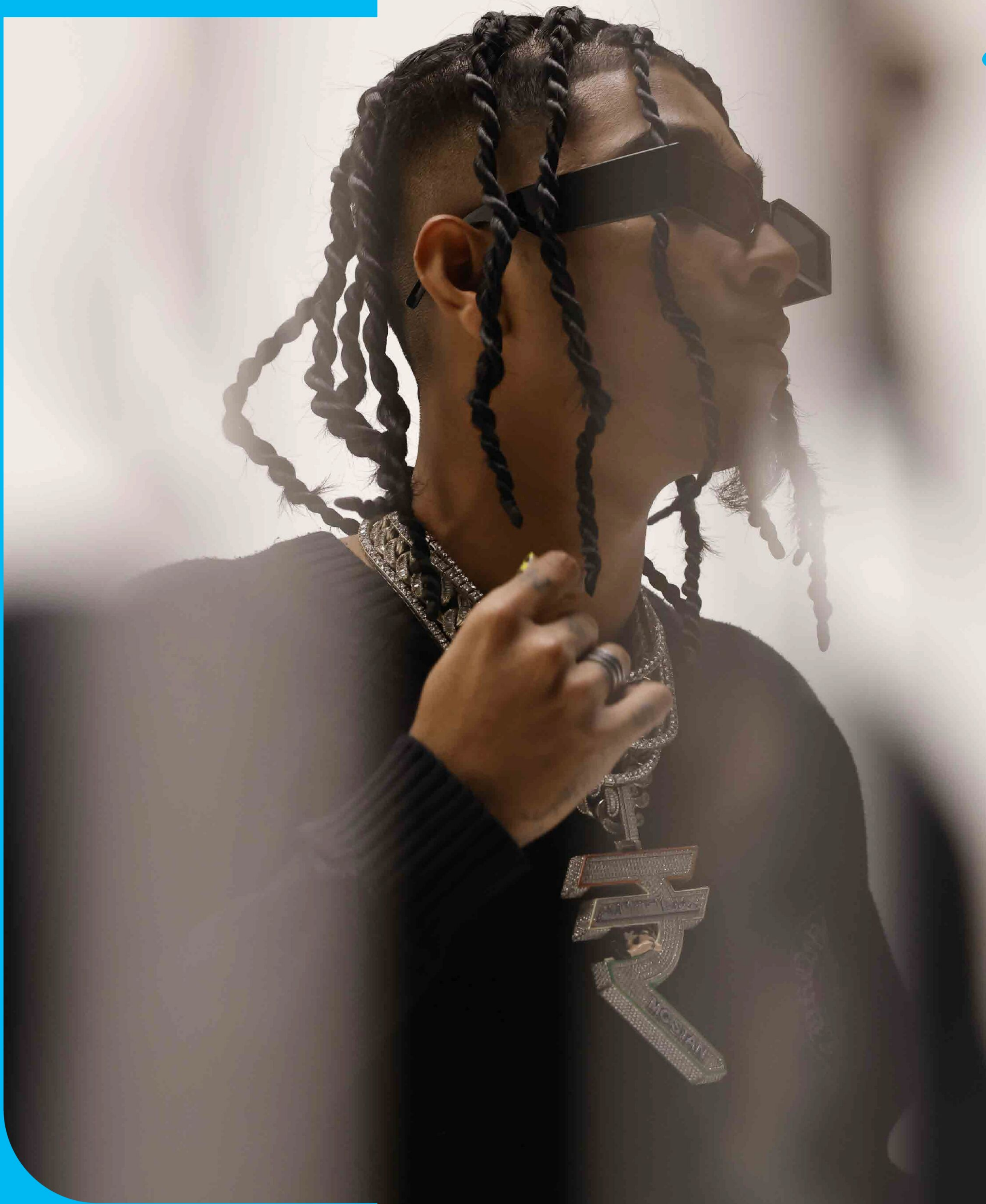
**What excites you about the future of music and what's one thing that worries you about it?**

I think social media has made people who listen to music become more tuned into the melody rather than lyrics. Melodies are nice, of course but back in the day, there was more lyrical storytelling. It's there in rap, of course, but I still think it's gotten bad in both rap and pop. I read lyrics for all the songs I hear, because I'm a songwriter and I love to know about other artists' lyrics and their process. But it's not there so much any longer.

But also, I'm pretty sure and I'm confident that in the future or maybe 10 years down the line, this thing will come back and artists who play real instruments and those who write or talk about the real world will come back.

**"WHEN I WAS UPLOADING THE VIDEO [FOR 'KAHANI'], I WAS THINKING IF WE'D MADE SOMETHING TOO CHEESY. I SHOWED IT TO MY DAD AND HIS DRIVER. MY DAD'S DRIVER, HE LITERALLY CRIED. MY DAD ALSO GOT EMOTIONAL WHILE WATCHING THE VIDEO."**

COURTESY OF ARTIST



# Indian hip-hop might be living in 2024, but the Pune rapper is living in 2050

## *By* Suprit Parulkar

MC STAN is not only living in 2050, but is also shaping it. His significance in the Indian music scene goes beyond his musical prowess but also reflects what it means to be an artist in the country today. He's introduced his own revolution in hip-hop, one that perhaps few notice because they are simply oblivious to it. The Pune artist straight from Tadiwala Road is bringing to light the hidden shadows of the Indian music scene by confronting uncomfortable truths that many prefer to ignore. It is the harsh reality of a divided nation where a select few enjoy the champagne lifestyle to a soundtrack that drowns out the struggles of the forgotten many. Amid all this stands the young 25-year-old Stan — part hero, part troublemaker, a rebel with a cause.

Let's be blunt, shall we? The so-called "music-enthusiasts" who caper around with their Airpods and Spotify playlists are nothing but hypocrites. They'll eagerly embrace Lil Wayne's profanity as if it were profound wisdom, but when it comes to artists like MC Stan, suddenly they turn up their noses. "Oh, but his language is too crude," they'll scoff, feigning ignorance as if they've never encountered a swear word before. But the truth is, while these "enthusiasts" look down on anything that doesn't fit their sanitized version of reality, there's a whole other India out there—a grimy, gritty India where people don't give a damn about taste or trends. They know hardships like the back of their hand. They know struggle, they know adversity, and they wholeheartedly embrace MC Stan.

Stanny, real name Altaf Shaikh, is not simply a rapper from Pune, Maharashtra, or as we all know it, P Town; he's a visionary. His approach sets him apart from many creatives of his generation. Dismissing work based on a reference-oriented approach, whether for music or music videos, where everything becomes a recycled version of something else, he emphasizes his focus on authenticity. Referencing his songs like "Snake," which now stands as a pinnacle in his body of work, he transports us back to the times when he dared to introduce fresh styles not only into his own creations but also into the broader Indian hip-hop scene. These efforts faced backlash initially, but now they've either been imitated or have served as inspiration for numerous artists striving for originality. "I don't care about the other rappers though," he says "In fact I'm happy people are able to make a living off of my musical style. But that's just not how I want to do it."

Moreover, in almost every MC Stan song, you'll encounter a call to shift perspectives. But he doesn't just drop these lines and move on; nor does he lecture or dictate. Instead, he crafts vibrant narratives, immersing both himself and his audience in the storyline, beckoning you to stand shoulder to shoulder with him. Then, with just the right words, he challenges you to reassess everything. Confronting the challenges facing his community head-on, he speaks directly to the youth, encouraging them to break free from the cycle of negativity. Whether grappling with adverse influences, violence, discrimination, or unemployment, he draws from his own encounters, transforming them into invaluable lessons.

While others chase the next hit, MC Stan is focused on something deeper, something meaningful. He's out to change culture and guide the misguided and misunderstood. What distinguishes him is his knack for blending storytelling with social critique, offering us a

glimpse of a future where art goes beyond mere entertainment and serves as a catalyst for societal transformation—a concept that's ahead of its time in today's often superficial music industry landscape.

In his 2021 track "Rehmani Keeda," Stan vividly portrays the struggles of boys wandering the streets of the neighborhood while their mother toils away at work. He delves into the harsh reality of parents working tirelessly all day due to poverty, prompting listeners to reflect on what they've done in return for their parents' sacrifices, evoking a sense of shame. His poignant lyrics include lines like, "*Maa teri kaam pe jaari sadra tu hood pe / Sharam aani mangti bro teko khud pe /... / Maa baap ne kaam kiya tere liye dhoop mei / Tune unko kya diya bete ke roop mei...*"

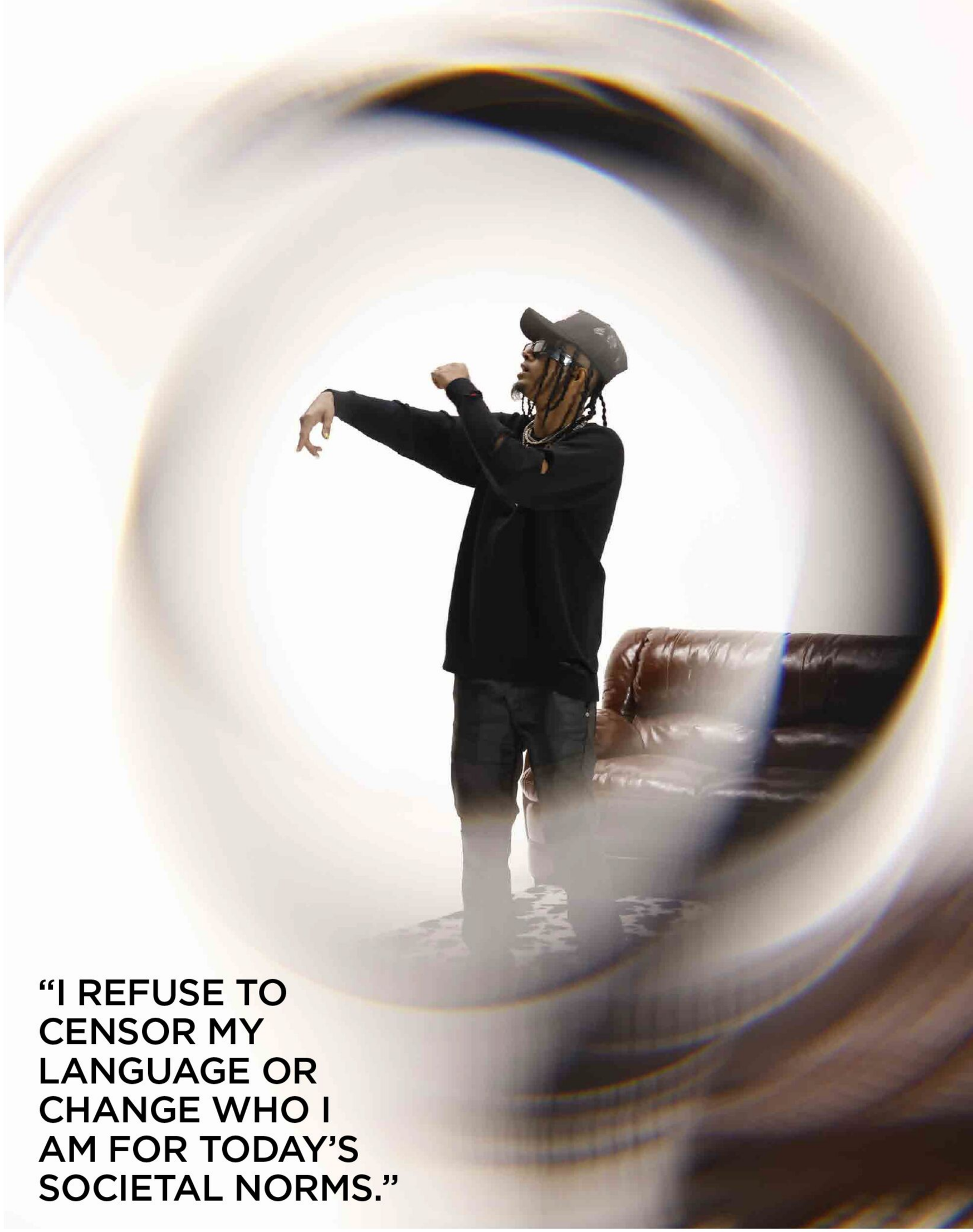
Taking a trip back to 2019, in his track "Lowkey," Stan casually adopts the role of an older brother, humorously addressing unemployed youngsters who seem to tire easily. He portrays common situations where individuals drift into small-time hustles or take up jobs at food stalls, circumstances all too familiar to many street kids. He highlights the struggles of those who have lost their way, neglected to call their mothers, or abandoned their dreams after minimal effort. With a blend of mockery and motivation, Stan encourages self-reflection and resilience, urging listeners to push through challenges and pursue their passions rather than succumbing to despair. His lyrics, such as "*Arey Gotya arey Gotya hook gaya tu / Ghar ka dekh rasta kaise bhool gaya tu / Matke ke dhande pai baith gaya tu / Maa ko call karne ka bhool gaya tu / Chinese ke gaadi pe lag gaya tu / Sirf do gaane aye dekh thak gaya tu*," encapsulate this sentiment with wit and authenticity.

"Ek Din Pyaar," a track widely heard, sees MC Stan delving into the harsh realities of youth entangled in drugs and violence, drawing from firsthand experiences. He vividly describes the numbing effects of popping pills, recounting a brutal encounter with the police, a distressingly common occurrence in India regardless of guilt. Stan presents a powerful moment where one individual pledges unwavering loyalty to their crew, equating them to brothers. However, he provocatively questions this loyalty, contrasting it with the anguish of a mother left at home, crying and praying for her child's safety. With impactful lyrics like "*Pill bitha dala maine meko numb laga / Police kutte jaise maar ri lekin lu*d laga / Mat kar, patkan, latkan ek bola bhau sathi kai pan / Bhau sathi kai pan, pan kashal karto bhau sathi kai pan / Aai pan radat basti, din raat aai pan*," Stan challenges listeners to reconsider their allegiances and prioritize familial bonds over destructive influences.

This aspect of his lyrics represents just a fraction of his overall musical talent. His focus isn't on concocting lyrical marvels or polished compositions solely for aesthetic appeal. Instead, he exhibits a remarkable degree of self-awareness. From the outset, he openly acknowledges his inability to deliver catchy hooks ("*Hook nahi gaane aata kasam se mereko*" from his 2018 hit "Wata"), his lack of understanding of pitch and melody, despite which his music resonates deeply with audiences ("*Na sur na taal na awaz meri khaas, phir bhi rehta sabke dil ke paas*" from one of his initial collaboration tracks "Trippin ft. MC THC"), even if it may sometimes cause discomfort to the ears ("*Kaan me hoti takleef sunke aisa ganda sound hu mai*" from one of his notable diss tracks "Samajh Meri Baat Ko").

He then delves deeper into language, opening up the conversation to something much larger than music and industry talk. He gets into the heart of being human, discussing people, storytelling and the impact of raw expression. For him, his linguistic choices are not just a reflection of shock value or rebellion but rather a deliberate and raw approach to telling stories. "I refuse to censor my language or change who I am for today's societal norms," asserts MC Stan. He says it with a bit of attitude but then goes on to balance it with his forgiveness and understanding for the haters and the doubters. He knows that change takes time, but he's confident in his ability to write the future with his words and his music. With unwavering hope, he repeats that change is inevitable, by accepting that everything has its course.

Juggling his vision of the future and his lessons from the past, Stan stays grounded. He shares his learnings from a mix of real, meaningful and downright bizarre experiences along the way. You can tell he's long reflected on them, weaving fun yet insightful, and often rhyming one-liners like "*Jayega kaam ko, toh khayega shaam ko*" (If you



work by day, you'll eat by night) and "*Insaan hi bangayela hai Shaitaan*" (Humans have themselves turned into the Devil) throughout the conversation, neatly tying up each topic we touched.

Reflecting upon his time on *Bigg Boss* (one of the biggest Indian reality shows) season 16 and the relationships he developed during and post his victory, he goes on to acknowledge that "one should never take anyone lightly, or for granted." Though he doesn't spell it out, you can sense the shift in his tone when he says that, becoming more reflective and introspective. But of course, without saying, this also goes for people's sentiments towards him. He is fully aware of how he and his image have evolved over time.

Without holding back, he also calls out some of his fans who cling so tightly to certain aspects of his music that they resist anything new, demanding "we want this Stan, or that Stan" referring to specific songs and styles from his career. They often forget it all comes from the same place. The good, the bad and the ugly all exist within an artist. "It is an artist's responsibility to explore new territories and push boundaries," he says. It's a challenge MC Stan gladly accepts. Highlighting the hypocrisy of the fans who demand a certain version of him, he points out how they'll be the first to criticize him if he only puts out work that's similar to his greatest hits. "Navigating this complexity means staying true to yourself while also remaining open to growth and evolution as both an artist and a person," he adds.

He draws a clear line between being a rapper and a hip-hop artist. "Hip-hop is not about crafting poems or reciting *shayaris*," he emphasizes, echoing sentiments from his early career hit "Samajh Meri Baat Ko." While poetry holds its beauty, or perhaps beautiful words encapsulate poetry, the bravery to express the raw, unfiltered truth possesses its own poetic essence. That's the heart of the art-form and he feels its time has come. He realized this the day he saw people selling bootleg T-shirts bearing his name and his face. It reflected the desires of those who couldn't access his shows or couldn't afford to dress like him but still wanted to be a part of it. While he knows the importance of not catering to fans or conforming to their expectations, he also respects their love and support that has propelled him to where he is today.

His latest tracks barely entered our conversation, as our interview evolved into much more than a platform for him to plug his music. It transformed into a relaxed hangout session where Stan freely expressed his thoughts. It was only after being prompted, he chose to playfully tease his upcoming album Mehfeel, hinting at a wave of innovation unlike anything we've heard from him before. Mindful of the spotlight he's under, he treads carefully, revealing just enough to pique curiosity without giving away too much. While subtly acknowledging imitators, he maintains his artistic integrity by viewing imitation as a form of flattery. Yet, there's more to Stan than meets the eye. His approach is distinct, his perspective refreshing. He's not just a wordsmith; his vision extends far beyond music. He's riding high on success, but his dreams reach towards a better future for the music scene in India. And you know what? He's already scheming to make it happen.

# dabzee

## The 'Malabari Banger' hitmaker shares exclusive insights on his upcoming projects, life, and his vision for the future of music in India

***By*** **Peony Hirwani**

FROM THE DAY he put out his first ever track to his current discography, Kerala's Dabzee lives life with a sense of awe and gratitude.

As the first artist from the South to be signed by Mass Appeal India, his journey is marked by milestones that have turned his dreams into reality. Collaborations with renowned names like KSHMR and Vedan have further solidified his place in the industry.

Against the backdrop of Kerala's thriving music scene, Dabzee shares insights into the transformative power of music and the challenges faced along the way. With a blend of personal anecdotes and profound observations, the "Malabari Banger" rapper offers Rolling Stone India an glimpse into his world and the future he envisions for the Indian music landscape.

***Rolling Stone India*: Since the inception of your first song until now, how has the journey unfolded?**

**Dabzee:** Well, it's been nothing short of a dream come true, I must say. Even back in the day, as I listened to music, vivid imagery always accompanied the sounds. To this day, that ability to visualize aids me greatly in my writing process and creative endeavors.

I'm truly grateful for where I stand now, having been signed by Mass Appeal India, marking a significant milestone, particularly as the first artist from the South to do so. Collaborating with KSHMR, a longstanding aspiration of mine, has also become a reality, alongside other esteemed partners like Vedan. It's truly indescribable—the feeling of dreaming something and then seeing it come to fruition.

**Not sure if you've heard but Malayalam Music is the World's Fastest Growing Category from India on Spotify, how do you feel about that?**

Yes yes, I feel proud. I can clearly convey to people that we are now making strides towards the mainstream. In the Indian music industry, being associated with movies has long been the norm. However, this perception is not entirely accurate. In my upbringing and even now, people often praise movies starring actors like Amir Khan or Mammootty, appreciating their songs without necessarily knowing the composers, lyricists, or vocalists behind them.

There's a significant lack of awareness regarding the collaborative efforts involved in creating a single track. It's challenging to educate everyone about the intricacies of music production. However, the landscape has shifted, and now, there's greater recognition for individual artists, such as rappers, and their contributions. The scene has exploded with over 10 to 15 rappers deeply engaged in their craft, indicating substantial growth and prominence in the industry. Personally, I find this evolution exhilarating, as I'm actively participating and collaborating with fellow artists in this dynamic environment.

**Have your friends and family been supportive of your journey as a music artist?**
Initially, there was uncertainty, and a lack of understanding about where to begin. I couldn't quite figure it out... Yeah, my father faced similar challenges. It's a societal issue, something many parents encounter, I believe, because there aren't any clear paths or examples to follow.

For instance, people might say, 'He's a good singer, but can he make enough money?' Whereas, if someone chooses a more conventional career like engineering, they receive more support. But this attitude stems from societal norms ingrained over time.

Nowadays, things might be changing, perhaps becoming more acceptable. From the beginning, my wife was supportive. She played a crucial role in supporting me during the initial stages. I remember discussing with her, expressing my need for time to pursue my passion. She responded positively, encouraging me to go ahead. It's been two and a half years since then, and I've made significant progress. Now, both my father and everyone else are pleased with my achievements. More importantly, I'm content. I can confidently say that I can provide for my family through my artistic endeavors.

**You're known to go all out with your music videos. There are rumors you've been shooting something fun in Dubai.**
Yeah, yeah, something exciting is on the horizon. Dubai feels like a second home to me. I lived there for six or seven years before returning to India. Now, I'm heading back again. Before, when I was there, I used to call it my "yah," meaning my place. I'm headed there to shoot my upcoming project.

**Congratulations on partnering with Mass Appeal by the way.**
Thank you. I feel immensely grateful, Alhamdulillah.

**Dabzee, being a rapper, how much does hip-hop as a genre mean to you?**
Truth be told, I'm not deeply immersed in the hip-hop scene or constantly listening to it. It's not something that has consumed me because, even now, I'm not entirely familiar with what's happening in the genre. I don't know who the top rappers are or who's producing the most intricate tracks.

Until now, I haven't been deeply involved, but I used to listen to various artists like Kendrick Lamar, NF, and others, particularly older tracks. Although I may not fully grasp the lyrical content, I appreciate the music and the overall mood of the songs.

However, I question why I should invest my time in something I don't fully understand. On the other hand, if I enjoy a particular track, regardless of its lyrical content, I'll still listen to it. That's just how things go for me.

**What kind of music did you listen to growing up in that case?**
My father was into the era of Mohammed Rafi, so I grew up listening to a lot of that style of music. Then my elder brother came into the picture. During his childhood, he was into Kumar Sanu's music.

During the 80s and 90s, there were plenty of hits in between. So, I was exposed to a lot of Hindi music and Qawwali during that time. When I came here, my mom would often play various songs at home, and I would listen to them attentively. Whenever a song came on, I would analyze its BPM (beats per minute) and tempo.

**Wow, and what are your thoughts on listeners in South India in general?**
In Kerala, among the audience using platforms like Apple Music or Spotify, I've noticed a unique trend. They tend to stick with tracks they enjoy for extended periods, often listening to them daily for four to six months. This consistent listening behavior leads to our tracks frequently making it onto their daily playlists. It's quite remarkable because they're not just casually listening; they're actively engaged with the music, incorporating it into their daily routines.

I strongly believe in this because I've observed that listeners from Kerala, particularly in the Malabar region, have diverse tastes. They don't confine themselves to one genre; instead, they enjoy a variety of music. For instance, I'm from Kerala myself, and I personally follow this pattern. I might listen to 'Chaleya' (by Arijit Singh and Shilpa Rao) at one moment, then switch to Vedan, followed by Divine and other artists. The enjoyment of music transcends language barriers for us; we appreciate music from all languages.

**"COLLABORATING WITH KSHMR, A LONGSTANDING ASPIRATION OF MINE, HAS ALSO BECOME A REALITY, ALONGSIDE OTHER ESTEEMED PARTNERS LIKE VEDAN. IT'S TRULY INDESCRIBABLE—THE FEELING OF DREAMING SOMETHING AND THEN SEEING IT COME TO FRUITION."**

I'm confident that even in this modern era, people of all ages in Kerala continue to explore and enjoy music from various genres and artists, whether it's Anuv Jain or others.

**What're your thoughts about the future of music in India?**
I firmly believe it's going to reach the next level, undoubtedly. Being from Malabar myself, I have a strong conviction about this.

**What can we expect from Dabzee in the near future?**
I personally have ambitious plans lined up for the future. By 2025, I aim to embark on a world tour following the release of my album and a couple of tracks in collaboration with Mass Appeal India. It's going to be massive. The next album with Mass Appeal is in the works, and we're going to elevate everything to the next level. There's no doubt about it.

**What's one thing that bothers you a little about the future of music in India?**
You know, everyone keeps talking about going international, but in my opinion, it's not about going international; it's about embracing the local. I strongly believe that being local is being international. Why? Because in my music, I represent my roots, my culture. I come from Malabar, from Changarang, from Kirikara, which are all within Kerala. And Kerala is part of India, and after that, anything beyond borders is international, you see. That's how it works.

People might praise and say, 'Wow, now you're international,' but I correct them, saying, 'No, I'm local. I'm from Malabar, and I'm representing my culture.' It's not just a statement; it's a reality, a realization that as an artist, I've come to understand deeply.

It's easy to imitate or borrow from what's already established, but those artists aren't from Malabar or Bharat (India). They might excel in Hindustani, Carnatic, or Mapilapatay, but they're not rooted in our culture.

And you see, even though various countries are doing their thing in techno or other genres, the sound originates from India. Yet, nobody seems to explore or appreciate the value of what we have here. India is rich in culture, from Rajasthan to Kashmir and everywhere in between. There's music in every corner, reflecting our diverse heritage.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOHAMMED SAGAR

# dhanji

## From drudging through bureaucratic red tape, to paying homage to the greats, this 25-year-old rapper has built the road he hopes to walk on

## *By* Aaryaman Trivedi

DHANJI, a rapper who has gained significant attention within underground hip-hop scenes nationwide, has engineered his own path to fame, money, and notoriety (pun very much intended).

Describing a young musician as possessing an "old soul" might sound like a cliché reserved for those with significant life experience, however Dhanji is redefining that notion. Imagine a youthful Bobby DeNiro fused with the lyrical prowess of Shawn Carter, infused with a touch of Thaltej charm, and there you have Dhanji. His debut LP, *Ruab*, released in 2023 with influences from motown and funk, is arguably one of the most innovative projects of the year, showcasing the talent and foresight of this 25-year-old rapper.

Read our interview with Dhanji below.

***Rolling Stone India*: Who is Dhanji and how is he different from Jayraj Ganatra (real name)?**
**Dhanji:** Dhanji is an outlet, Dhanji is a project. The sense of self as described by me. *Meri zindagi hai* (it's my life). I found this as my outlet, and it helped me understand more about who I am as a person.

**In Reddit AMA conducted by r/IndianHipHopHeads someone asked you why you started making rap music and you said, "to express myself within a system". What did you mean by that?**
Rap music is a form of expression, broadly speaking. Like any art form ever, it has a system; a set of rules that you can adhere by and break sometimes. It's a system that's been laid out across cultures, across time. *Yeh system hai jisme jo bolna hai bol sakte hai* (This is a system where you can say whatever you want). Rap music is me expressing myself through it.

**In that same AMA, when asked about what art inspires you, your answer was fantastic. You said "pussy, the internet, Louis C.K, LSD, Dostoevsky, and ambition". Walk me through some of these.**
[*Laughs*] *kya bolu abhi* (what do I even say?). I hate idolizing artists to be honest. *Aadhe toh madarchod hote hai* (half of them are mother*ckers). But all things said and done, Louis CK is an example of someone who tried his best to perfect his form and that's what I strive to achieve always. Then LSD, pretty standard shit you know. Opened my third eye. The rest were just major motivators to force me to express myself.

**Take me through what it was like growing up in the city of *Amdavad* (Ahmedabad) and finding your way in a local industry that you helped create. What was the experience like?**
"Growing up in a city like *Amdavad - zyada chamak-dhamak toh tha nahi* (there's not a lot of shiny things), you know that. Nothing substantial really, when I was growing up in 2004/5/6 onwards - it was pretty sparse and rural. Whatever was happening was happening. The city grew with us. The ruling party had a hand to play in it, *samajh rahe ho* (you know what I mean?) Good or bad, it made us who we were. With my 2023 debut LP *RUAB*, I did lock in and worked out a lot of what I wanted to. *But kehte hai ki gadda hai - gir jaaogey*, (they say that when there's a ditch, you'll fall into it) when you try to encapsulate what your "sound" is. I am still growing and evolving as an artist. What I tried to remain constant was authenticity. The reason why Amdavad fit so intricately well with the album was because I never forced it. It's just what naturally fit. It spoke to me even when I didn't intend on it.

**How did Danny Brown, Funkadelic and Ice Cube become some of your biggest inspirations for your album *Ruab*?**
**Dhanji:** "F***, I don't know man. I honestly wish I had answer to why funk. Going just farther back, *jab yeh moments aate they, jisme main inke gaane sun raha hoon, naya kuch discover kar raha hoon*, (when there were moment where I'd listen to their songs, I'd discover something new) some of the songs just clicked you know? I'm listening to Ice Cube, I'm listening to shit that I really dug. It made a really strong impression on me. I started asking ki "*bhenchod uska sample kya hai?*"(f*ck, what's that sample? I just wanted to trace the lineage as far back as I could. *Fir laga ki yahich hai* (Then I thought this is it) This is what I really like. I love classic shit. I love the horns, the acoustic drum grooves - shit like that feels really classic to me. The album is a classic right out the gate, no matter what people say.

**How did elements of a legal notary as the album artwork come to be?**
"Personal life shit affected that for sure. Growing up, I saw a lot of bureaucratic things just happen around the lives of the people around me. The good, the bad, the ugly of it all. It's a reflection of the 25 years I've been in this city. The paperwork, the "*sarkaari kagjat*" of it all was because my family has always been involved with the law. Mostly on the wrong side of it. Growing up, seeing my daddy go to jail.

"*Baapu bolta office jaakar job kar // aur who khud officer quarters ke bahr maarta officers ke quarter*".

"In classic Dhanji style, I'm not going to explain it but I'd rather let people interpret what they must, you know?"

**Talk to me about DHH (Desi Hip Hop). What does it mean to you? How have you, along with contemporaries like Bagi Munda, Arpit**

**Bala, Siyaahi, Gravity, etc worked to develop the identity that it holds?**
"When I picked up the pen to write Hindi-rap music, I wasn't even thinking about "DHH" (Desi Hip-Hop) to be very frank. But this is my house type of shit, you know? *Chota hai, thode kaanch futele hai, light nahi chalti, but mera ghar hai* (it's small, some of the windows are broken, the electricity doesn't work, but it's my house). Desi Hip Hop is an integral part of what I do and I represent it, whether I chose to or not. And Desi means so much more than just one language or one country - there's Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh - the whole subcontinent. I'm with it bro. I'm with the idea of it.

**Do you often get star struck? How do you envision yourself fitting in an industry that is populated by some of the biggest stars?**
"That's a tough one. Yes, I do get star struck. When I first met Raga for the first time, I got star struck - he's someone I really really look up to. Now I get to work with him, make a song with him. About the industry though, I'm still trying to figure it out. I can't give a definite answer you know? I have some ideas about what I should do - what the *industry should do* - I don't know. But me as an individual, as an entity, representing however many people I do, close or far away, I know what I should do. I have certain ideas that I'm trying to execute for sure. I'm genuinely trying to shake things up in whatever way I can."

**Do you believe that the industry you are working in is overly affected by ideas of the past? Where do you see the future of Indian music - specifically hip hop? Is there room for innovation?**
**Dhanji:** "I'm not trying to be pessimistic in this interview [laughs] but I don't know half the time. What you said is correct - our industry does sometimes get stuck in the past. Indian Hip Hop is still a little volatile. It can go anywhere in any direction. Anyone who is trying to make something substantial and create an impact - whether it's rappers, producers, journalists, artist managers, gig promoters - will keep their shit alive. I don't know if the industry is primed for it yet, but everyday me and my team try to do the same. Me, Saqlen [my manager], my company Thaltej Publishing Co., we all work day in and day out to figure out. It's not one deal, one event or one song. It's that whole one-step, two-step, three-step game.

**On distributing physical CDs at the Riverfront in Ahmedabad:**
"Bro I'm an old soul, I love classic shit. From 50 Cent to Rakim, everyone went through that same grind. That path went a bit obsolete with new technology. But I always saw value in that and I will always push to promote more physical media. This is a big part of the work we do at Thaltej Publishing Co. - maybe it's a bit contrary, challenging the norms, even outdated - but we're doing it because we find value that's been lost.

**What are your thoughts on the integration of newer technologies, like artificial intelligence, in music?**
**Dhanji:** "That's a heavy question. I am a f***ing nerd to be honest. I read research papers, I try to be up to date with new advances in the AI space. It is humanity shifting shit. It's unreal. I spend 2 hours a day trying to learn more and more. To this day. I'm very much with it, but I know I'm in an artistic field and it's messing up the rules and frameworks that have been set forever. Nothing has challenged us this much, to this degree, ever. It's a wild f***ing time and I'm still trying to grasp it. One thing's true though, art is still art and technology should always support it. If you're an artist in this day and age and y'all are not thinking about this shit, you might just become obsolete too."

**What's your message to audiences that may not know who you are?**
**Dhanji:** "For the people out there and everywhere: taking risks is back. Giving a f*** about shit is back. So back."

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# yashraj

**With chart-topping collaborations with seasoned veterans, this rapper has consistently been in the conversations of industry observers**

***By* Aaryaman Trivedi**

AFFABILITY IS SOMETHING that Yashraj possesses in tonnes. The young Bombay-based rapper took the Indian hip-hop scene by storm with his powerful delivery, intricately crafted lyricism, and innate hunger to prove his own mettle. With chart-topping collaborations with seasoned veterans like KSHMR and Karan Kanchan, the rapper has consistently been in the conversations of industry observers. Rolling Stone India spoke with Yashraj to explore his journey to reaching to the point of career-comfort that has allowed him to innovate to the degree that he is able to today.

***Rolling Stone India*: Who is Yashraj and how is he different from Yashraj Mehra?**

I think Yashaj is the person that was brave enough to do everything Yashaj Mehra couldn't or say everything that Yashaj Mehra couldn't. So, I think I was always a kid on stage, but to have the ability to do that with my own music, to do that with my own lyricism, to do that with the same people I've worked with, has always been like this dream. And I think it's the ideal self. I think me just being able to live this life, get on the stage, have that switch, which switch is real. Like the switch is really real though. Like I'm different when I'm normally operating with my friends or while I'm in the studio also.

But stage is just like home to me. So, I feel like that switch is very evident. And yeah, it's just, it's like my mode of expression, music, and being able to be this artist is my outlet to say anything and be whatever I can be.

**Take me through your personal journey. I know you grew up in Mumbai and you mentioned in an interview that, and I found this so fascinating, your mother would read you bedtime stories? How did that affect your music?**

I think the concert of Lorries was really, like I think that was the main highlight. I think my mom and my nani, I think these were two people that have sung me to sleep. Both of them respectfully don't have that great voices, but they were absolutely phenomenal at putting me off to sleep because yeah, there was this purity, there was this magic and just falling asleep that way. I feel there's so much of subconscious development that happens when you're just listening to music or you're surrounded by so much music. Like I remember my mom used to play these ghazals every time. She used to like sit and clean her room and she used to just drag me, make me sit down in that room just so that I could sit. And she used to clean her, like do her own

work. And I used to just sit there, like listening to all of these ghazals, when I was like five, six years old. So when I was 10 or 12, like I could sing those ghazals, but I had no idea what I'm talking about. And everybody in my family used to be like, why don't you listen to music of your generation? Or how don't you remember the lyrics of music of your age? And I used to just be like, I can't, I can't remember the lyrics of my own generation's music, but this is the stuff that's imprinted in my head for such a long time. So it's crazy how like growing up, just the exposure to the right kind of music, like I'm honestly an old head in that matter.

**When was the point when you started taking a career in hip hop seriously? Was there a moment that you can recall where you said, now I'm in a space where this is what I'm committing to?**

I was always a kid on stage. I was a mass media student. So I love different forms of writing, not just poetry or rap or music. There was writing scripts. We were writing short films. You were writing like, you know, essays. We were writing research papers. You were writing all of those things. So I love making short films during my like BMM days also. So I just, just that realization that the fact that I can stay behind the camera in front of the camera, the music can be mine. The writing can be mine. Everything that I can create can be solely, I can be the source of that, you know, that realization was the day. And obviously like hip hop being such an impactful culture in my life, I think I realized me, all of my creative satisfaction and all of my creative inhibitions can get fulfilled by this one genre of music called hip hop, or just take this career a little more seriously.

**What importance would put on a sort of textbook education approach to music versus something that is more experimental. Do you think one is better than the other? Is there value in either?**

There's value in both formal music education and self-taught methods. Dismissing music theory outright is short-sighted; it's more about understanding its importance rather than rejecting it. While I personally lack formal training, I make efforts to learn independently, utilizing resources like YouTube. Continuous learning is crucial in music; stagnation is a pitfall. We all have a capacity for growth, regardless of our educational path.

**Talk to me about Desi Hip Hop (DHH). What does it mean to you? How have you, along with contemporaries like Chaar Diwaari, Seedhe Maut, Hanumankind, etc worked to develop the identity that it holds?**

I don't think anybody of us started off with the idea of making DHH, right? We just made the music and people termed it as that. The vision was to always build a blueprint for ourselves. It's so exciting to see, like when we used to drop music, there used to be like back in the day, there used to be two hip hop releases a week at max. This is when I'm talking about like 2017, 18 cipher days where we used to go out at gigs. Now, when you look at it now, there are like 10 projects dropping a week. So, the best part about a culture is when it's successful, when there's money in it, you know? That's the unfortunate reality, but it's the truth of life. I don't mean to reduce it to commerce, but the fact that people can sustain and live their lives as rappers in this country is amazing because that wasn't the case 10 or 20 years ago.

For us to be able to live a life where we can provide to a certain extent, drop the music we want to, and still have the privilege of keep going at it every single day, I think that's the most beautiful part of this culture. So, yeah, a hundred percent.

**Has your relationship with your fans changed in the recent past? Your live shows are high-energy, often filled with an element of chaos. What is it about live performances that keep you motivated and excited?**

I was supposed to release music on my birthday in 2020, but it got postponed due to the lockdown. I ended up putting out my first EP on April third of that year. Before that, I had material on YouTube, SoundCloud, and other platforms, but I lacked the confidence to share it on streaming services.

So, I'm essentially a product of the lockdown. My point is, for almost a year and a half, I've only been exposed to metrics, social media numbers, likes, and comments. I haven't experienced people's reactions to my music firsthand. It's been complete isolation. My only feedback came from the people I interacted with on Discord or my family. The first time I performed on stage after the lockdown, the reaction of people singing along to even the most obscure songs, word for word, was everything I could have hoped for.

So, whenever I perform, I have two mindsets. Firstly, I aim to put on a show for those who know my music well. Secondly, I strive to win over those who have never heard of me. I want even those five people who are unfamiliar with my work to leave thinking, “That was an amazing show. I had a great time.” This ideology has been ingrained in me because, even before streaming platforms or extensive online marketing, bands used to tour extensively to build their reputation through word of mouth. That old-school approach still holds value to me. While I might reach a certain audience through streaming platforms, the real challenge lies in converting people in real-time during performances.

I look forward to this challenge and enjoy being genuine and spontaneous on stage. I don't overthink things or have too many scripted elements. I simply speak from the heart. So, yeah, a hundred percent.

**Where do you envision your career in the next three years? What do you as an artist aspire to provide to the Indian musical landscape that you think it hasn't gotten yet?**

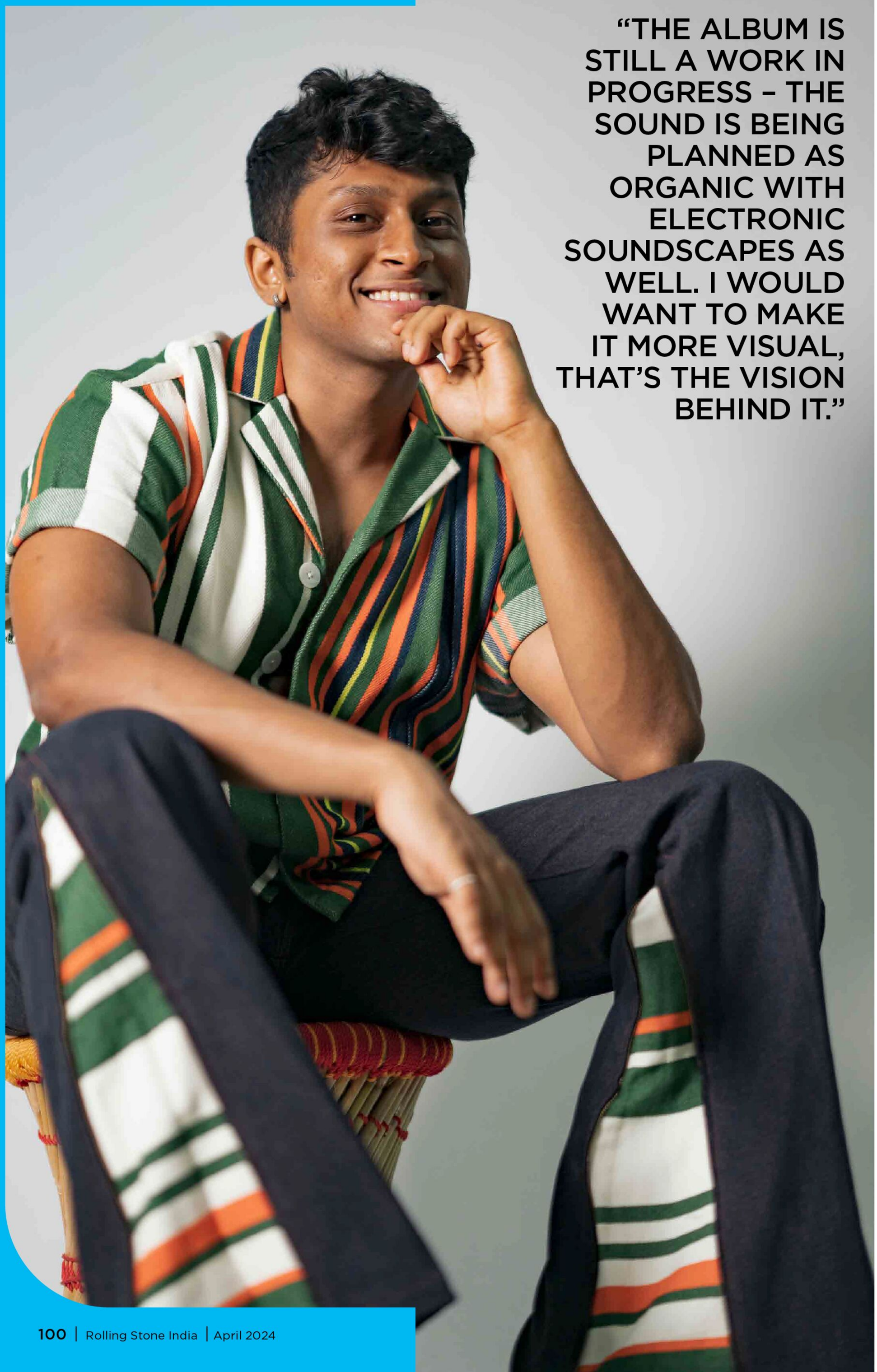
There can be great music videos, everything done bootstrap, everything done with our friends. In a way where it brings this sense of community. It's shamelessness more than anything, I feel like that's what we need in artists. So I think we owe it to ourselves more than anybody to just go ballistic in these next three years, at least me, I feel like I don't want to leave any stone unturned.

Finally, I think I'm in a place where I'm able to do that. With the projects that I'm working on right now, like this next EP that I'm working on, I think it's going to be all these different sides of me that come out, I think in the most confident way possible.



COURTESY OF ARTIST

# amrith ramesh



"THE ALBUM IS STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS – THE SOUND IS BEING PLANNED AS ORGANIC WITH ELECTRONIC SOUNDSCAPES AS WELL. I WOULD WANT TO MAKE IT MORE VISUAL, THAT'S THE VISION BEHIND IT."

# Understanding the interplay between abiding by tradition and progress is no new feat for this 25-year-old composer

## *By* Aaryaman Trivedi

TO UNDERSTAND Indian music in all its uniqueness and diversity, one must pay close attention to what is happening in the south of India. Amrit Ramnath, a 25-year-old singer and composer based out of the city of Chennai, has taken the industry by storm.

Beginning his career with Tamil hits such as "Oorkuruvi" and "Nila", the young maestro has now taken to the big screens with the announcement of him being the music composer for director Vineeth Sreenivasan's 2024 film *Varshangalkku Shesham*. *Rolling Stone India* got the unique opportunity to speak with Amrit Ramnath to explore his journey as a classically trained vocalist and musician, while taking the much-needed respites to test his creativity in as many different forms as he could.

***Rolling Stone India*: Your earlier covers with fellow violinists really stood out, and then there's your track Manase, which seemed to mark a turning point in your career. Can you share more about the inspiration behind Manase and how it shaped your perspective on love and relationships?**

**Amrit Ramnath:** "Manase" was one of my first independent songs and it delves into the complexities we face in our late teens and twenties, especially regarding love, friendship, and personal security. The song explores the conflicting voices in our minds and the journey of embracing and overcoming them. The music video aimed to visually represent this inner conflict and the ethereal nature of the song.

**It's fascinating how you translated those themes into such a visually striking piece. You come from a family with a rich musical heritage, particularly your mother, Bombay Jayashri. Can you tell us about your upbringing and how being surrounded by such talent influenced you?**

My upbringing was immersed in music, thanks to my mother's diverse musical background. She exposed me to various genres and styles, including classical, Bollywood, Marathi, and more. Growing up in such a musically fertile environment shaped my eclectic taste and provided me with a solid foundation in diverse musical traditions. She has been easily the most influential person in my life in the sense that she's been my, of course, mentor, teacher, but more than that, she's been such an incredible friend.

The thing is, you know, I grew up in an environment surrounded by music. And while she practiced classical music primarily, owing to the fact that she was born and raised in Bombay, meant that, you know, she was exposed to all kinds of music. She's been performing all kinds of music, be it old cinema music from the industry, Hindi music, Marathi music, Bhav Geeta, Ghazals, Hindustani.

It's like she donned all those hats for me. And I was fortunate to have learned, you know, like very pan-Indian music growing up. So I've been trained in like light classical, Ghazals, very, very classical music.

I've also learned Western classical music. I've been like brought up listening to a lot of like Hindi music from the 60s, 70s, Bengali music, because my father's from Calcutta. So I think growing up was very like, you know, think of putting a child in a very musically fertile environment.

**Beyond being a vocalist, you're also involved in music production. What draws you to production, and how do you balance the creative process with the technical aspects?**

I approach music production from a performative perspective, treating it as an extension of my musical expression. My aim is to create a sonic palette that aligns with my artistic vision. Balancing creativity with technical proficiency involves channeling my emotions into the music while also honing my technical skills to execute my vision effectively.

**Your recent collaboration on Vinit Srinivasan's film scoring project marks your debut as a music director. How was the experience, and how does scoring for film differ from your independent work?**

Collaborating with Vinit on *Varshangalku Shesham* was a rewarding experience. It allowed me to blend my musical vision with his visual storytelling, creating a cohesive audio-visual narrative. While scoring for film requires aligning with the director's vision, it also provides an opportunity to explore different emotional landscapes and enhance storytelling through music.

**The rise of South Indian music, particularly in independent scenes, has been notable. Where do you see the future of this industry, and how can platforms support artists like yourself on a global scale?**

The South Indian music scene is thriving, with artists exploring diverse genres and pushing boundaries. Cross-collaborations and support from platforms like Rolling Stone are vital for amplifying the reach of South Indian artists on a global scale. As an artist, I'm excited about collaborating with musicians from different backgrounds and genres to create unique, cross-cultural music experiences.

**Collaboration seems to be a recurring theme for you. Are there any specific artists you're eager to collaborate with in the future, both locally and globally?**

Locally, I'm keen on collaborating with artists like Armaan Malik. Globally, I admire musicians like Divine and Jacob Collier, with whom I hope to collaborate someday. Cross-cultural collaborations offer exciting opportunities to blend diverse musical influences and create something truly innovative.

**You've mentioned the blend of traditional and contemporary influences in your music. How do you navigate preserving cultural heritage while experimenting with new sounds and styles?**

I draw inspiration from my cultural heritage while exploring innovative sounds and styles. For me, cultural preservation involves delving deep into traditional roots while embracing contemporary influences. It's about honoring the past while evolving with the present musical landscape.

The art form I work with allows for a very limitless approach to music. At least that's what I really believe. Because at the end of the day, my roots are very Indian music, like very Indian sounding music. But it's not necessarily Indian classical music. Only because while Indian classical music is, say, what my mom performs the most, it's not the only style that she's been trained in. So I feel like therefore, I can really borrow from all kinds of art styles.

I think there's a certain amount of rigidity in the classical music industry, which is changing, I think, with the generation to come. Because I feel like it's for no fault of anybody, it's the approach to the music that needs to change, right? Which is that classical music in its purest form is absolutely stunning. Like Carnatic music, for example, is something I borrow from all the time.

And it's my way of thinking. It's like my language, like how we're speaking right now in English. That's my language. But it doesn't mean therefore that, you know, it can't be used to meander through other musical styles. And I think at the end of the day, if you really work towards finding a certain sound that you're very, like, again, very sincere about, I feel like, you know, you can really, I feel like that rigidity is now slowly changing with guys like, like Jacob Collier just released a song with Anoushka Shankar, Ravi Shankar's daughter. And it's absolutely beautiful. she plays a very, very, interesting tana bit of sorts. And he's singing in a very Western style.

But there's a real marriage between the two styles.

**Lastly, what are your thoughts on the integration of new technologies, such as AI, into music creation? How do you see it shaping the future of music?**

AI presents exciting possibilities for music creation, but it also raises concerns about authenticity and artistic expression. While AI can aid in certain aspects of music production, the emotional depth and human touch in music remain irreplaceable. As artists, we must leverage technology thoughtfully while staying true to our artistic vision and integrity.



COURTESY OF ARTIST

# anumita nadesan

## The singer-songwriter talks about her first Malayalam film song, her upcoming debut abum and working across genres and languages

***By* Anurag Tagat**

SINGER-SONGWRITER Anumita Nadesan is, among several other indie artists, proof that one can hold an audience captive with creative cover songs and then make them stay and become fans of your original music. Since the release of songs like "Khwaab" (2022) and "Katputli Ke Dhaage" (2021, with The Yellow Diary's Himonshu Parikh), Nadesan's dulcet vocals have become her calling card of sorts.

Since then, Nadesan has gone on to working with producers and composers ranging from Shashwat Sachdev to OAFF, Sez on the Beat and Pina Colada Blues. Although a lot more persevering with her song releases in an era where artists are expected to capitalize on a hit song and put out a bucketload of singles in a year, Nadesan has been working on her debut album. After a few years of putting songs out via labels, this one marks an independent release for what she describes as her most ambitious project yet. Read our interview with Nadesan below. Excerpts:

**Rolling Stone India: How's everything going in terms of navigating the music industry so far?**
**Anumita Nadesan:** It's going really well, and I'm really excited about what's yet to come out. I'm working on my first album and that is very, very exciting for me. So far, I've only done singles. So it's been quite difficult, working on it song by song and also because I was introduced to that kind of a culture [of releasing singles].

That's definitely there but it kind of broke my train of thought as an artist who's writing music. I'm really excited to put an album out. It's mostly going to be out a couple of months later. I love storytelling, as in, making it more visual, so there'll be a lot of visualizing and images. Even with the songs that I'm writing, I would want to imprint a story into head of the listener, with colors with light and all of that.

**Have you been chipping away at it until completion for some time now?**
I'm also [releasing] it independently. So far, I've only worked with labels, so that's another reason it's taking a lot of time and effort. Plus,

I'm working with like really cool collaborators as well, in terms of the composition and all that. Really looking forward to that.

**Speaking of the fact that you worked with labels for your singles, what was it like?**
Most of the songs were with labels and I think they take complete control of things when you're working with them. I'm a control freak, basically [*laughs*]. I start freaking out if something is not in my control or if it's going wrong. But I've not faced that much of an issue with anyone – most of the labels are very pro-artists. I think was quite lucky.

**As an artist who first blew up online during the pandemic and then began seeing audiences come out to shows, what was it like seeing that on-ground conversion?**
What happened with me was I started doing covers, so that conversion from covers to originals was a huge task, personally. It wasn't easy, but then going out there and performing in front of people was a completely new experience for me. My heart is always full when I see people singing along to a new melody or anything like that.

People have always been so kind and I'm a person who very much enjoys intimate setups. I'm kind of nervous when there's a lot of people but I'm hoping to change that. I look forward to the intimate gigs especially.

**You recently had a Malayalam song out for a film, "Maarunna Kaalam" from *Nadanna Sambavam*. What did you want to get out of a project like that?**
That's my first Malayalam song and I'm from Kerala, I'm a Malayali so that was really special to me. I did it last year and it came out this year. It is definitely a long term vision – being a multilingual artist. I really enjoy singing in different languages. So that was just I'm considering that as a starting point and that I'll get to do more.

I think that comes from... I love singing in Hindi. But then the thing is, I also love singing in other languages, like English, Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi... any of these languages. I can speak in these languages, so it would be really cool if I can write – sooner – and sing my own songs in my mother tongue.

**How did your collaboration with hip-hop artists Sez on the Beat, Lit Happu and Yungsta on "Nirvana" come about? How do you think about these cross-genre experiments?**
This collaboration was like an experiment for me. These people were really cool and they were such nice people also. They were asking me, if I would like to do a song and they sent me the track and I literally sent them a voice note and they liked it. I was quite surprised but then it turned into a song. I definitely learned something from that.

I definitely want to experiment a lot with other genres and artists. That's definitely there.

**What's something that excites you about the future of music and one thing that worries you about the future of music?**
Okay, that's a tough one. Something that really excites me would be a lot of artists are putting out music. I've been exploring artists who are not too big or anything, but it's just very exciting when you find a new artist, especially when they're more from the same country. That's something I'm always excited about.

I'm not sure what I would be worried about as such. As long as people are being honest about themselves while putting out music, I think that's a good way to take it ahead.

**Anything else you can say about your upcoming album?**
I'm really excited about it because I'm working a lot of other artists in the industry. Getting collaborators on board has been exciting. The album is still a work in progress – the sound is being planned as organic with electronic soundscapes as well. I would want to make it more visual, that's the vision behind it. I also paint – so I'm taking something from all the other skills... I wouldn't say skills, the hobbies that I have.. and putting it into this album.



COURTESY OF ARTIST

# baby jean

## An insider's look into the Malayalam rapper's creative process as he shares the passion and dedication driving his musical evolution

***By* Peony Hirwani**

ORIGINALLY FROM OTHALUR in the Malappuram district of Kerala, Baby Jean introduces a unique angle to the Indian music scene by blending hip-hop with regional elements. Making a splash in 2023 with his widely acclaimed tracks "Bandana" and "Thalakkanam," the 23-year-old artist has experienced a meteoric rise. Within just a year, Baby Jean has amassed over one million monthly listeners on Spotify, an impressive feat considering his discography comprises only seven tracks thus far.

*Rolling Stone India* had the privilege of engaging in an exclusive conversation with the artist, delving into his journey as an emerging rapper, his deal with Mass Appeal India, and the intricacies of his music-making process.

***Rolling Stone India*: Baby Jean, what inspired you to pursue a career as a rapper? How did your upbringing and early exposure to music influence this decision?**

**Baby Jean:** Growing up, art was an integral part of my life. While in college, my interest leaned toward directing movies, and I even collaborated on a short film. Initially, I never envisioned myself as a musician or rapper. My introduction to music came from my mother, who aspired to be a singer with her melodious voice.

**Congratulations on signing with Mass Appeal India. It's an impactful achievement. How does it feel?**

Hailing from Othalur, a small village in the Malappuram district of Kerala, India, where art isn't widely appreciated or encouraged as a career path, this opportunity means a lot to me. When my music gained recognition in the South, the chance to join Mass Appeal—an international label—was truly one of the highlights of my life. I take great pride in this collaboration. I'm particularly grateful to Ranbir Kapoor, the senior A&R at Mass Appeal, for having the foresight to include me in this venture alongside other talented artists from Kerala. It's a monumental step.

Singing in my native language (Malayalam) and partnering with Mass Appeal opens doors to sharing our music and culture with a broader international audience. This aspect of the collaboration feels like a remarkable achievement to me.

**Your hard-hitting hip-hop and drill style in Malayali vernacular has gained recognition across Southern India. What inspired you to blend these genres with your regional language?**

I've come across many artists keeping to their roots and slang and tying their culture with the craft they do, so that has always been an inspiration. And when I'm thinking from that core, I've understood that 'you perform your best in a language you're used to and its easier to put the culture you are brought up in into words since you're living it' so that honesty of experience has always been a driving factor when it comes to inspiration, the delivery of the art is more beautiful and raw that way.

Every community has its own unique slang and modes of expression. When I wrote my first song, I discovered that my words flowed more naturally in my own dialect, so I embraced it. Malayalam, in its essence, is a beautiful language, and the way its words intertwine creates a captivating rhythm that speaks to me. In fact, throughout my journey as an artist, I've been fortunate to have my songs embraced by people, which serves as inspiration in itself.

**Your tracks "Thalakkanam" and "Bandana" are both incredibly infectious rap records. Could you share the inspiration behind these tracks and what message you aimed to convey through them?**

"Bandana" is deeply rooted in my passion for fashion, which has always been a means of self-expression for me. Before delving into mainstream rap, I explored fashion and costume design. The track speaks to a broader audience while keeping fashion at its core. As I wrote the song, my focus was on the importance of maintaining motivation and not losing sight of one's goals, regardless of the challenges faced. It's about persevering towards your aspirations, even when circumstances seem dire. While references to brands like "Jordans" and "Bandana" may seem like mere flexing, they actually symbolize my commitment to holding onto my identity and vision for success, even in tough times.

Its not about the flexing of the Jordans or the Bandana, it was my reality at the time, regardless of how worse the situation gets I won't lose grip of my identity and my vision to succeed, and since I'm into fashion that's how I treated the lyrics of the song, to keep persisting.

Thalakkanam" on the other hand encompasses a diverse range of themes. It's a homage to my hometown, intertwining themes of achievement and cultural heritage. The song also touches upon societal divisions and the importance of rising above them, focusing instead on collective progress. It's a call to action, urging listeners to work hard towards a shared vision for positive change.

Both tracks reflect my personal experiences and beliefs, offering listeners a glimpse into my world and the values that drive me as an artist.

**What challenges have you faced as a South Indian hip-hop artist breaking into the mainstream scene, and how have you overcome them?**

Breaking into the mainstream was not my primary goal; instead, I focused on pursuing art forms that excited me. I don't confine myself solely to rap; rather, I explore various styles and continue to experiment with different mediums to express my creativity. I never aimed to sound commercial or chase mainstream success; I simply stayed true to my style, and everything else naturally followed suit.

For instance, my latest single "Kaayi" was written long before [my 2023 track] "Bandana." I deliberately avoided altering its content to fit a commercial mold or succumbing to the pressures of time. I released it as originally intended, staying faithful to my vision.

I find fulfillment in being at the forefront of the music industry and witnessing the impact my music has on my audience. Moreover, I've always sensed a spirit of collaboration among my fellow artists rather than competition. It's gratifying to see us collectively riding our own wave and making strides in our respective creative journeys.

**Could you walk us through your creative process when crafting a new track? How do you approach writing lyrics and selecting beats?**

When it comes to selecting beats, it's all about the excitement factor for me. I trust my instincts after listening to a beat a couple of times. If it hits me and evokes a certain feeling, I go with it. It's not a process that requires too much deliberation. Once I have a beat that speaks to me, I usually have a topic or subject matter already in mind to build upon. I then see how the beat complements the flow of lyrics I have in mind and work towards that. It's a fluid process.

What's crucial for me is that the topic or story I'm writing about has a clear beginning and end within the song. I don't spend too much time on the writing process. Once I have a subject to focus on, I delve into it from all angles, infusing it with emotions and perspectives that feel authentic to me. The goal is to keep it raw and true to my experiences and insights.

**Collaborations are a big part of the hip-hop scene. Are there any artists, producers, or creatives you're particularly eager to collaborate with in the future?**

At the moment, my priority is to develop my own unique sound and create more music independently. I'm not actively seeking features on my solo projects right now. However, I'm open to collaborations when the timing feels right and the quality is exceptional. I believe in waiting for the opportune moment on this journey.

One thing though, there are several collaborations lined up for the coming year where I'll be featured. I'm genuinely excited about these opportunities and can't wait for them to be released.

**How do you balance staying true to your roots while also evolving as an artist and exploring new sounds?**

For me, maintaining authenticity has never been a struggle. It's ingrained in who I am, and incorporating my experiences, ideas, and emotions into my music feels natural and fulfilling. Balancing this authenticity with evolution as an artist is a seamless process, as it aligns with the lifestyle I've lived and the values I hold dear.

I find that I don't stray far from what feels genuine and comfortable to me, whether it's in the sounds I explore or the flows I employ. Instead, I focus on refining and improving upon the elements that already connect with me. This ongoing process of growth allows me to channel my energy into each song, ensuring that it remains true to my roots while also showcasing my progression as a rapper.

**This one is something I may be asking all your artists featured in this campaign – what gives you hope about the future of music and what worries about the future of music in India?**

Music has always served as a powerful means of expression, offering hope and inspiration to listeners across generations. With sincere and impactful lyrics, it has the potential to catalyze positive change in society. This ability to inspire and uplift others fills me with hope for the transformative role that music will continue to play in people's lives. I'm grateful for the platform I have to share my thoughts and aspirations through my music, to inspire others along the way.

Personally, I don't dwell too much on worries about the future of music. Like with anything else, there are both positive and negative aspects to consider. Instead, I choose to focus on what I enjoy and what brings value to my life. I'm more excited about the journey ahead and the endless possibilities for creativity and exploration in music. That's where my attention lies.

# chaar diwaari

## The New Delhi artist is now looking beyond hip-hop with his visual storytelling and avant-garde approach to music

## *By* Aaryaman Trivedi

GARV TANEJA, or has he's more commonly known on screen and on stage as – Chaar Diwaari, has become one of the most spoken-about artists coming out of Indian hip-hop. The New Delhi-based 22-year-old has proven time and time again that if you have a clear vision and a story worth telling, you will get a scarily loyal fanbase. From the release of his 2022 four-track EP *Teri Maiyat Ke Gaane* to status-cementing singles such as "Jhaag," "Garam" and his newly released track "Thehra," Chaar Diwaari has been pushing the boundaries of what it could mean to create art. Rolling Stone India spoke with him to unravel his artistry.

***Rolling Stone India:*** **You once mentioned something in a podcast that really stuck with me. "Chaar Diwaari is what Chaar Diwaari will become." What did you mean by that?**
**Chaar Diwaari:** [*laughs*] Yeah I feel like what I said is both good and bad. I guess it means to me to always try to push harder and actually test my limits all the time. But it also creates some mental pressure. My public persona is what I want people to see versus who I am, just as Garv Taneja, you know?

**I want to explore your personal journey in reaching to where you are today. You briefly attended Mumbai's True School of Music. What was the experience like?**
True School of Music was the most important and the most useless thing that I've ever done. It gave me as a person and as a musician, the most I've ever gotten, it shaped my life in those three years that I was there. But it was useless in terms of what we went there to do, we didn't do [any of it].

We went there to study, we didn't study there. But we came back as different people because of the environment. It's a very isolated place. My campus was huge -- it was just super empty sometimes. So, in such an isolated place, if you see the same 30 people every day when you wake up, you are bound to change.

**How much importance do you place on "textbook" education of music, versus a more "throw at the wall and see what sticks" approach?**
I'm not sure because I'm a devil's advocate in that sense, because knowing nothing and knowing everything are both great ways to [be] and also knowing something [about] all of them. They're great ways to make music. I've recently I've started to believe that it's important to know the rules to break them.

I'm not the most intelligent person in terms of music theory. But I don't know it fully. I know enough to write my own music. I've seen people who know nothing write much better songs than I have ever had. Sometimes I wish I didn't know anything, because that puts you in a different mindset altogether and you try to make something that you will never usually do.

It's a bit of both, I feel.

**When you released the music video for your track "Barood," the audience response was incredibly analytical - in the sense that many people seemed to have unique interpretations of your work. Do you think there should be inherent meaning attached to whatever you do, or do you revel in the abstractness and absurdity of what you make?**
In my work, I have a story that I want to tell and I tell that story in the way that I want to tell it, but I also leave room for imagination. Because that's how I like to enjoy art.

I didn't know what ['Barood'] was about. I didn't know. It was very fascinating to me because of the way it was composed.

It's a very weird, almost dreamy way of writing that song. I'll give room for people to bring in their interpretation which are always very interesting. They have very strong responses. Sometimes they blue ball me. Either they don't like one choice I made and it ruins their whole day or they're like, 'Oh fuck, this is the best thing ever.'

**You don several caps in your career. As a rapper, a performer, a director, a video editor, a curator. Do you enjoy having this much ownership and involvement in all your work? Or does it ever feel burdensome?**
I love directing my music videos. I love making my music videos. Making a something original means that sometimes you have to throw your amazing idea straight out the fucking window.

When you have a limited budget, you gotta problem solve. You're doing it in real-time and you have real stakes on point because you have a limited budget and there are only a certain amount of things you can and cannot do. So, bringing a great video out is a challenge and it's also like a game.

**Are there any films, directors or auteurs that you often look to for inspiration?**
So, *Pyaasa* is my favorite film. Guru Dutt, I see as a big inspiration. I see Anurag Kashyap, David Fincher, [Quentin] Tarantino. But yeah, I'm like your average film bro also.

You know, I fuck with sad Ryan Gosling movies. I love that. It's one thing to be inspired it's another thing to attempt to imitate. It's a very difficult challenge to try and replicate or imitate what someone that you really look up to tries and does. But when you do it in your own [way], it's nice and feels nice.

I'm a very amateur director. I feel like I don't have a particular style yet. I'm still developing that and learning my way up. I have no like real knowledge of how cameras work and how lights and everything works. I just have a very straightforward idea in my head and I just know what I want. I know how it's supposed to look, I know how the camera will move, how it will be choreographed. I have to practice a little more but I'm getting better with every video I make, I believe.

**Talk to me about Desi Hip-Hop [DHH]. What does it mean to you? How have you, along with contemporaries like Yashraj, Arpit Bala, MC Kode, Gravity, worked to develop the identity that it holds?**
I'm very thankful because when I came up in the scene, the DHH community welcomed me with open hands and open arms and they're a very tightly-knit fan base of sorts. As time goes on -- I can already feel it -- I've stopped making hip-hop music, I'm making music that I'm infusing everything that I want to in a single song. To me it's a very free art form now. I'm not looking

at making a beat and rapping over it. I guess with time the music that I'm going to make -- the music that other people are going to make -- will help bring out maybe another community of music enthusiasts.

The current ones will also have their taste buds developed because I feel that the current hip-hop scene is very saturated. We have the same people doing the same things over the same type of beats over and over again. I guess it's time for a change. We need artists who are trying to push the boundaries. I feel that the DHH community itself will also evolve very much as new artists come in.

**What are your thoughts on the integration of newer technologies, like artificial intelligence, in music?**
I've worked -- in fact all the musicians that I know -- have worked a lot on the skill aspect of making music. With every generation that comes, you feel like the older generation complains about the newer technology. When the 8-track came and mono became stereo and then programming came and so on and so forth, the idea of real music is always questioned. Is this real music anymore? Is electronic music real music? It created in a doorway to let people in and challenge things. If you listen to some of my songs you barely hear any real instruments -- it's a very feeling-driven and programning-driven approach.

I guess artificial intelligence will obviously have a big role to play but more than even adapting, it's about embracing it. I have to understand how it can add to the process and embrace the goods and the bads because it's almost inevitable. In one year, the development that AI has had, it's incredible and I think the most that I've seen in any sort of media so I'm excited and very scared at the same.

**I'd love to know what you have in store for the coming year. Are there any specific projects that you're excited to share with the world? What should we expect from Chaar Diwaari this year?**
I have two or three singles and then an EP lined up, there is this EP that I've been working on, it's called Duniya Aur Diwaari and which hopefully drops this year only and before that I have 2-3 songs that I want to share with people. I'm going to keep changing, keep evolving, keep becoming a better musician keep becoming a better artist and that's about it.

"I HAVE A STORY THAT I WANT TO TELL AND I TELL THAT STORY IN THE WAY THAT I WANT TO TELL IT - BUT I ALSO LEAVE ROOM FOR IMAGINATION."

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# dot.

## Aditi Saigal went from one viral song in Indian indie to acting, singing and writing lyrics for 'The Archies' and now, a pull-out all-the-stops album is on the way

***By* David Britto**

New Delhi-bred and Bengaluru/Mumbai-based artist Aditi Saigal aka Dot. has seamlessly woven her passion for music and acting into a career that is on the upward. Raised amid a backdrop of creativity, Saigal's upbringing under the guidance of her parents, Shena Gamat and the late Amit Saigal, laid the foundation for her journey as an artist. Her father, affectionately known as Papa Rock within India's rock music circles, instilled in her a deep appreciation for music, while her mother's background in theater ignited a passion for performance. From her breakout viral hit "Everybody Dances to Techno" to her seven-track record *Khamotion* and most recently the 10-track *Practice Rooms*, her musical repertoire reflects her eclectic sensibilities and boundless creativity. Simultaneously, her foray into acting, marked by her debut role in Zoya Akhtar's The Archies, underscores her versatility and screen presence.

Read our interview with Dot. below:

**Let's revisit your early years when you began playing piano at a very early age. What was the kind of music you were exposed to?**

There were kind of two sides of what I was exposed to. Obviously, there was the kind of jazz scene from my mom and dad. They listened to a

lot of classic rock and there was always cool stuff playing in the house. Then in school, there was a lot of talent shows and also a lot of *Hannah Montana*. Then as I went on, I think I kind of gravitated towards listening to all these singer-songwriters, Paulo Nutini and KT Tunstall and Fiona Apple and all these people who are kind of little bit jazz-blues influenced but who are songwriters. Since then, it's kind of expanded.

**Like many people, I first came across your work in 2017 with "Everybody Dances to Techo," tell me about what you recall at the time that song started getting attention.**
That song was kind of in the YouTube time of my life. I was at the time studying in Wales, doing my undergrad and I used to go for these open mic nights and cut my teeth. I had some originals under my belt, so I kind of kept writing to increase my set at the open mic nights and then I started putting them up on YouTube just as a random thing. It wasn't really something I planned to blow up or anything. People seemed to like them and the algorithm picked it up.

**If I could ask you about your dad as well, because he was an integral part of the scene.**
When I was growing up, probably my first ever gig that I attended was a heavy metal concert in Delhi somewhere. I would have been five or six. Throughout, I never really was into rock or the kinds of things that he was known for. It's funny because obviously everybody has this idea of him and how he was and they have a very warm relationship with him and they're very fond memories, but my memory of it is entirely different because he was just my dad. That indie music scene never really happened for me at that point. I was at the gigs running around doing random things. I guess that's pretty much it. I've actually written a song about it as well. It's not out yet, but it's kind of a little bit about this, this feeling of people knew him in this certain way, and I had a completely different understanding of who he was.

**As an actor, you starred in *The Archies*. What was that whole experience like for you?**
So 'Asymmetrical,' one of the songs from that YouTube time got picked up by Zoya. While we were having that conversation about the music, she kind of went, 'Do you act? You look exactly like one of the characters. I think you'd be perfect for Ethel.' So, I said, 'Okay, well, I'll audition.' I've never really done it professionally. It was great because I don't think I would have ever gotten into acting had it not been for that film, because it was kind of the perfect blend of the two worlds as an entry point for me because it was set in that era, which is very my vibe. The music of the 50s and 60s is me and my music was part of it. I got to learn how to dance and skate and do all those things. It was like a summer camp, pretty much, for two years. Everything feeds back into the music and the music feeds back into the acting, and it's all the same. So, I'm exploring that as well. Now I'm kind of getting into the acting side of things and trying to balance both.

"I KIND OF STRUGGLED TO WORK WITH OTHER MUSICIANS BECAUSE I WAS VERY ISOLATED AND I USED TO JUST SIT ON MY PIANO. BUT IN THE LAST THREE OR FOUR YEARS OR SO I'VE MADE IT A THING THAT I HAVE TO JUST GET OVER MYSELF AND START WORKING WITH AS MANY PEOPLE AS I CAN AND LEARNING BECAUSE I USED TO JUST GET VERY INTIMIDATED."

**You've collaborated with a few indie artists including Chirag Todi, what's that experience been like?**
Before Chirag, I kind of struggled to work with other musicians because I was very isolated and I used to just sit on my piano. I wasn't great at the teamwork aspect of it, I guess. But in the last three or four years or so I've made it a thing that I have to just get over myself and start working with as many people as I can and learning because I used to just get very intimidated. Now I want to work with this person and this person and in India, I get this sense that you can pretty much approach anyone on Instagram and they'll be like, 'Sure we'll do a song.'

**You put out your second album 'Practice Rooms' at the end of 2023, can you tell me a bit about that record and what it means to you?**
It's all the old songs and I had been bombed with requests from everybody to put out on Spotify and on Apple Music. I never did it because I had this pressure on me that I really need to go into the studio and do them properly and have a band set up. The truth was my heart wasn't in those songs anymore, I couldn't sit and rearrange them and do all of that. The other thing is every time I tried to do that, the songs were just losing their charm and their initial sweetness. I think that's what people connected with and I didn't want to disrespect that, in a way, it was kind of don't mess with a good thing that people already like. Those songs are the reason why I have a career.

**What are you currently working on and what does the rest of 2024 look like for you?**
I've been gigging around with my duo act right now. I just want to get a bunch of gigs in this year because I realize that I want to stay in touch with performing. The other thing is I'm working on my new album and it's a big one. This album is a pull-out all-the-stops album, so I'm kind of sparing no expense. It's kind of little bit Latin grooves, some Americana, pop and jazz.

**What according to you is the future of music?**
I guess there's a lot of pressure putting out lots of stuff all the time, but I think the future of music, as far as I can see, it's becoming more diverse with more sub genres and collaborations from across the world and different scales of music production. Now, pretty much anyone can put out a track. Things are getting diluted but also expanded. So, I don't foresee that stopping anytime soon. I think that there will be some kind of a need for simplicity at some point.

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# ishaan ghosh

## Between techno, jazz and several other styles, the Mumbai tabla artist and composer is taking his craft in new directions

***By* Anurag Tagat**

GEN Z INDIAN classical artists could very well be a movement that's here to stay thanks to the likes of tabla artist Ishaan Ghosh. It helps that Ghosh – the son of veteran tabla artist and proponent Pandit Nayan Ghosh – has lineage on his side, but he's very much interested in breaking out of any and all compartments that may be associated with the instrument.

Case in point, his recent single "Euphoria," which pairs techno with tabla in a way that puts the latter at the center, making for the kind of electronic fusion that has rarely been heard. In an interview with Rolling Stone India, Ghosh talks about the making of "Euphoria," influences and realizations, plus his projects for 2024.

***Rolling Stone India*: What drew you to working with Nakul [Chugh, producer] and specifically a more techno kind of arrangement for "Euphoria"?**

**Ishaan Ghosh:** Layering the track with some techno arrangements was the first thought that ran across my mind right after recording a few patterns, by me and a tabla ensemble comprising some brilliant disciples of my father. It was more like we got into the studio, started recording and that's when all the ideas started popping up. For me, this is basically how I work most often! I just wanted people to swing and groove to the track when they hear it eventually. However, at that point, the idea was still vague but the one thing I was sure about was to have the amazing Nakul Chugh work on this as he'd be one of the few ones who would understand my vision, just through the music.

**People would think it's unorthodox for a tabla artist to be inspired by techno. What do you feel is the common ground that these rhythm-centered styles share?**

By this question, don't you think one is categorizing the tabla into something that is 'orthodox'? What is that 'orthodox'?

I feel these are merely compartments we construct in our own minds. And I want to let go of them! As an artist, I am inspired by literally every kind of music I come across. Let alone music, even the tempo that the seat belt alert in my car provides, gets me grooving!

Rhythm itself is a common ground. If you break it down, it's just a pulse. Hence, what can be more universal than rhythm?

Today, we have access to all forms of music and if one is exposed to the right music at the right time in the right frame of mind, it subconsciously creeps into your thought process and eventually comes out in your creations.

**What's an unlikely influence for you in terms of music styles that you would say comes into your songs?**

Majorly Indian classical. I know you may not find it unlikely, but what fascinates me are its innumerable facets and how the process of discovering them is an unending one. Every time you dive into it, you find a new avenue to explore.

Almost as if our music inherently possesses the necessary elements for a wholesome experience of any kind.

**I think art and music making always comes with its share of discovery or even self-discovery within an artist's mind from time to time. Was there anything you discovered about yourself recently that was a nice kind of realization?**

A big part of studying music and being a practicing musician is about the constant learning and un-learning that happens. It makes you realize how insignificant we are, as compared to the vastness of the art. That's one. Secondly, music erases all distinctions that we as a society have created and so, no matter who you are or where you come from, if your music is meaningful, there is always space for you! Isn't that so beautiful?

Sometimes I go through phases when there are multiple such realizations all pouring in at once; and then there are times when I am merely enjoying the experience of music making and not thinking at all!

**We often hear about musicians who are brought into the artform because of their parents. Was there ever any resistance towards the tabla for you? Or did you always feel it was a natural fit?**

[Laughs] No way! Ask my parents, tabla was all I did and wanted as a kid. I was just in love with it, thanks to my father [Nayan Ghosh] and his aura as a performer. I don't think that feeling of mine has changed a lot now either. As I've said a number of times before, the tabla was my favorite toy and now it's my friend, companion and a force that I worship!

**What is one thing that excites you about the future of music and one thing that worries you about the future of music?**

There's so much that excites me! We have an incredible amount of supremely talented musicians in India and around the world. Just to watch musicians make magic and to know that those who are of our generation – the younger lot – will continue to do so for decades to come, itself is exciting. And to top it up, we all have access to literally every kind of music that exists on the planet. What can be better? All of these styles or musicians do influence our own musical thought process, directly or indirectly.

Music is meant to help overcome worries so I'm not worried about anything but yeah, the one thing that I am and hope other musicians are particular about, is to value the contributions of so many great musicians before us. It is very important to realize that we are part of a heritage and so, [we] aren't the first or last ones making music.

As T.S. Eliot famously said – 'Tradition; how the vitality of the past enriched the life of the present.'

We should all bear this in mind!

**What else is coming up in 2024?**

Lots of music, both releases and tours! Starting with a single in March, recorded live in concert at Amsterdam's prestigious Muziekgebouw Concert Hall with my father Pandit Nayan Ghosh.

Soon, you'll also hear a special tabla-jazz trio along with German jazz virtuosos Max Clouth on guitar and Vroni Frisch on the bass.

And of course, a couple of more tracks recorded with the same tabla ensemble as 'Euphoria,' but very different in spirit!

"AS AN ARTIST, I AM INSPIRED BY LITERALLY EVERY KIND OF MUSIC I COME across. LET ALONE MUSIC, EVEN THE TEMPO THAT THE SEAT BELT ALERT IN MY CAR PROVIDES, GETS ME GROOVING!"

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# lisa mishra

## Working with creative forces from Chicago to Mumbai has helped this vocalist pave a new path in the industry

***By* Aaryaman Trivedi**

IT'S INCREASINGLY difficult to ignore Lisa Mishra, an artist known for her brilliant vocals and innovative approach to music. From her latest single release, "Saza," to her collaborations with emerging talents, Mishra discusses her journey from Chicago to the global music scene, reflecting on the influence of her experiences and the integration of technology in music production. With a focus on authenticity and innovation, she shares her vision for the future of her music and the industry at large.

***Rolling Stone India*: Lisa, first and foremost, let me extend my heartfelt congratulations on your latest release, "Saza," with Warner Music India. The vocals were impeccably recorded, adding a distinct quality to the song. Could you delve deeper into the creation of this track and shed light on why it resonated with REPRESENT's founder, Ayushman Sinha?**

**Lisa:** Thank you so much. "Saza" holds a deeply personal significance for me. Drawing from over 15 years of experience in the industry, I wanted this song to be a true representation of myself as an artist. The decision to seamlessly blend English and Hindi was deliberate, aiming for a universal appeal that encapsulates raw emotions. I believe Ayushman connected with the relatable lyrics and the authenticity that shines through in the composition.

**Your journey from Chicago to collaborating with renowned artists like Chance the Rapper has undoubtedly shaped your approach to music. How has this experience influenced your artistic vision?**
Collaborating with artists like Chance and being exposed to top-tier production has been incredibly influential in shaping my artistic vision. It broadened my horizons and allowed me to explore different sounds and styles, which is reflected in my latest album.

We graduated high school the same year and they just needed a backing vocalist one day and I came into the studio and the first song I ever recorded in a professional music studio was all we got from Coloring Book, the Grammy winning album. And the song obviously features Kanye West. And I can't believe my first ever contribution to a professionally recorded song with a writing credit because I ended up working on the melodies as well.

It happens to be with Chance and Kanye. So I feel very lucky and I feel very grateful. But that also meant I was in the midst of some really incredible producers at that time who are the most familiar people in music production nowadays.

One of those people was this really great producer named Carter Lang and he's sort of the sound of... He is the sound of SZA, who's my favorite artist. And a lot of my artistry and what I'm trying to do in India with music in Hindi is inspired by two people, Kehlani and SZA. And Carter's worked with both of them.

And over the years, just hearing the music he was making and getting exposed to the art these women were making, I really pulled a lot from there to make my album. And SZA, this song, the name is obviously inspired by her. It's like my tip of the hat.

**Your approach to songwriting is fascinating, starting with emotions and visuals before crafting melodies and lyrics. Could you walk us through your creative process and what inspires this unique approach?**
Absolutely. My creative process is deeply personal and unconventional. I often begin with emotions and visuals, allowing them to guide the direction of the song. It's about capturing the essence of a feeling or a moment and translating it into music. This approach ensures that my music remains authentic and true to myself as an artist.

**Transitioning from Bollywood to non-film music must have presented its own set of challenges. How do you navigate the industry's expectations while staying true to your artistic vision?**
Transitioning from Bollywood to non-film music has indeed been a journey of self-discovery. It's about finding a balance between industry expectations and staying true to my artistic vision. I strive to break barriers and challenge norms, paving the way for solo, non-film female artists to shine on a global stage.

**What are your thoughts on the integration of AI and technology in music production? Do you see it as a tool for innovation or a potential threat to the authenticity of music?**
The integration of AI and technology in music production is a double-edged sword. While it can undoubtedly be a powerful tool for innovation and efficiency, there's also a risk of it diluting the authenticity and soulfulness of music. As a purist, I believe that music is best driven by human emotion and creativity. While technology has its place, it's crucial to maintain a balance and preserve the integrity of art.

It's lame, but I want art to be human and I want it to be... I know AI is something that we created. Of course, we can always argue in circles about that. But I really think music is this beautiful, beautiful thing that is best driven by us. Of course, there's digital elements. That's just how music has evolved. But to wholly hand off the task to AI, I just can't imagine how sad that would be.

We can't replicate human emotion until we get into supra AI, right? But I just want us to be purists about music. It's this beautiful, beautiful, wholesome space. And we're already seeing it, unfortunately, in the lyrics that are being turned out by AI that are being put into songs. And I know it sounds like a fun cheat code, but at the end of the day, it's just sad to me. I want us to be able to do these things ourselves. It's the same way I feel about using iterations of songs again and again.

**Your collaborations with emerging talents like beBhumika and Rizzy Rico have been both exciting and inspiring. What do you find most rewarding about working with young artists, and how do they influence your own creative process?**
Lisa: Working with emerging talents like Bhumika and Rizzy Rico has been incredibly rewarding. It's inspiring to see their fresh perspectives and innovative ideas. Collaborating with young artists not only provides me with new insights but also pushes me to explore new horizons creatively. They bring a unique energy and enthusiasm to the table, which fuels my own creativity and keeps me motivated to continue pushing boundaries.

**Lastly, where do you envision your career in the next few years? What are your aspirations for the future of your music?**
In the next few years, my goal is to see a solo, non-film female song top the charts, both domestically and globally. I want to continue pushing boundaries and inspiring others to embrace their authenticity in music. My aspirations for the future of my music are rooted in authenticity and innovation. I hope to continue creating music that resonates with audiences on a profound level while also challenging the status quo and pushing the boundaries of what's possible in the industry.

"I STRIVE TO BREAK BARRIERS AND CHALLENGE NORMS, PAVING THE WAY FOR SOLO, NON-FILM FEMALE ARTISTS TO SHINE ON A GLOBAL STAGE."

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# Lydian Nadhaswaram

futures 25

## The Chennai artist, who started playing drums at the age of three, is planning a massive Tamil album and wants to steer the music industry away from its film soundtrack obsession

***By* David Britto**

CHENNAI-BRED 18-year-old Lydian Nadhaswaram, a prodigious musical talent, has captured attention with his unparalleled mastery of the piano but he's now a multi-instrumentalist who plays up to 25 instruments. Nadhaswaram's musical journey began at the age of three, displaying an innate gift for rhythm and melody. His rise to fame came with his stellar performances on the global stage, including American reality talent show *The World's Best* in 2019, catapulting him into the spotlight in India and abroad. With an impressive repertoire spanning classical, jazz, and contemporary genres, Nadhaswaram's virtuosity is at the forefront, leading to composing music for an upcoming Malayalam film.

Read our interview with Nadhaswaram below:

**Take us back to your early years. You began playing drums first at a very young age and then moved to piano. How was that transition?**

Yes. So I started playing drums when I was three years old. So this was long before I can remember too, but we have video proof of that. I started in 2007 and was a drummer until 2014. Then I shifted my main instrument to piano. From then on, I turned into a full-time pianist, learning a lot of genres and instruments. Now I can play 25 instruments. This is how my career started.

**Would you say the piano is your primary instrument, though?**
Yes. I can say I have two primary instruments: drums and piano because I don't want to leave drums alone; that's my first instrument.

**You attended KM College of Music & Technology, what were those years you spent there like?**
Well, even before I joined KM, I was performing in a lot of shows and concerts and was sent a lot of albums and other things. But, mainly I joined KM to learn tabla, Hindustani style tabla, and then I used to go around the college and explore a lot of instruments. This method of piano playing really impressed me, it's called the Russian piano style, and the faculty and the tutor there was Dr. Surojeet Chatterji. I learned under him for like two years, and it has a unique style. And then I also explored more genres and piano such as jazz and blues and other things, although that was not in KM. The Russian piano learning was in KM.

**How did you first come across this style of piano playing?**
I used to see them performing, and also when some guests that [A.R.] Rahman sir brings to KM, we all used to go there into the Russian piano studio, and they used to perform there. So that style really impressed me, you know, and it felt a little unique other than other piano styles and I just wanted to learn that and explore that a little bit.

**"HE [A.R. RAHMAN] IS ONE OF THE SWEETEST AND ONE OF THE MOST HUMBLE HUMANS. HE ENCOURAGES ME AND HE'S VERY CARING AND WHENEVER HE SEES ME HE GIVES ME ADVICE ON A LOT OF THINGS. HE'S BEEN A REALLY BIG SUPPORT."**

**What's your relationship with A.R. Rahman like?**
He's like one of the sweetest and one of the most humble humans. He encourages me and he's very caring and whenever he sees me he gives me advive on a lot of things. He's been a really big support.

**You're dabbling as a film composer now -- what's that been like?**
Yes, I'm doing a film and it's my debut film. It'll come out this year soon and it's a very big film, a commercial project in Malayalam.

**Could you tell us about your experience on being part of the reality show *The World's Best* and also winning it.**
It's an unforgettable experience for me. Honestly. I mean, [I was] going all the way from here to Los Angeles and competing with 195 countries and the only one who who's representing India. It felt really special and there were five rounds. In each round I did something unique and special. Then I finally won the competition. I believed in my practice and I believed in music and it didn't let me down.

**You recently met Jacob Collier, how was that interaction?**
If you ask me, Jacob is one of my biggest inspirations in music. The stuff he does is absolutely out of the world. I mean even his recent album [*Djesse*, *Vol. 4*]; I heard a few songs before the release and it was absolutely amazing. And I'm sure that he's going to bag the Grammys this year or the next year. Meeting Jacob in Bangalore, it was a real pleasure. I saw that he was going to perform in Bangalore during October and the show was on November 6th and I immediately DM'ed Jacob on Instagram saying I'm so happy that you're coming to India and he was like 'Brother come over to Bangalore. Let's meet up sometime.' He's was so kind to reply. We saw his full show and then after the show, he invited me all the way to his green room, we nearly spoke for like 45 minutes, just two of us standing. I'd brought my small traveling keyboard, too, so we were playing on that and jamming. And I also gifted him a South Indian percussion instrument. He's a wonderful human being and he also signed my guitar.

**What are you currently working on and what can we expect from you for the rest of 2024?**
We had this idea for like over eight years to do an album that highlights the identity of the Tamil language. There are over 1,000 couplets and each couplet has so much meaning in it about life lessons, about material life and relationships, morality and everything. We want to let the next generation and the current generation know these beautiful life lessons musically. So it's a very meaningful project and massive project.

**What according to you is the future of music?**
Well, in my humble opinion, there's a lot of scope and a lot of young artists who are coming up, and I have seen many artists. Of course, Jacob Collier is the biggest and he's the biggest example in today's music world. He's bringing new sounds. Exploring new things in music and he's inspiring millions of people. Even from India, I've seen a lot of other artists who are rising. In India, we basically have a vision that music only comes from cinema, but I want to take it to the next step and I want to break that barrier and bring independent music as the mainstream thing here. I personally have plans to release independent music, I have albums lined up in different genres such as jazz, blues and Indian fusion, rap and pop and rock and R&B and indie. I'm seeing people who are executing these ideas too, which really gives hope to the next generation of musicians.

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# paal dabba

**The Chennai artist behind '170CM' is not just about rapping, as he draws from Afrobeats, funk and R&B and swearing by slick choreography and vibrant visuals**

***By* Anurag Tagat**

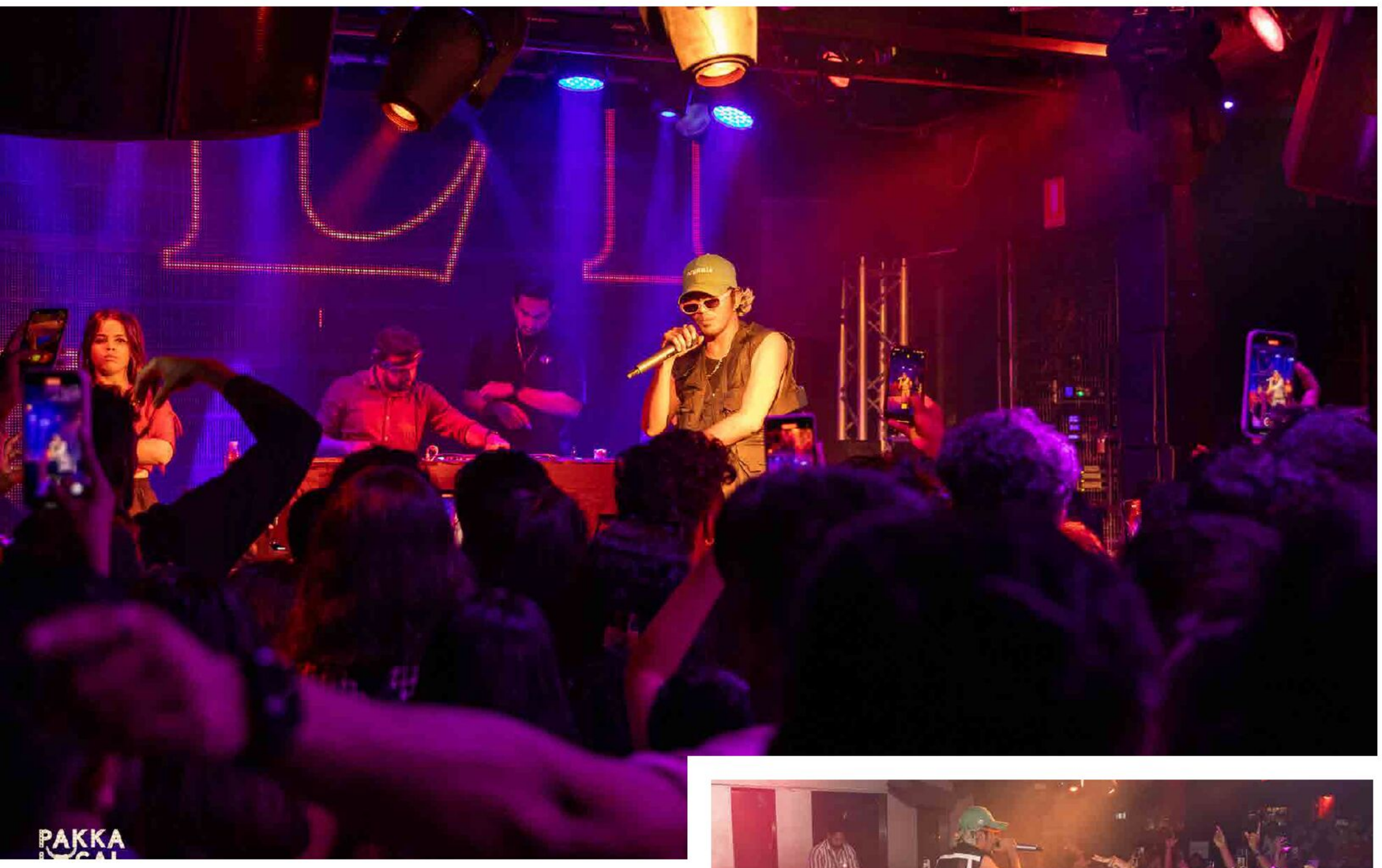
PAAL DABBA AKA Anish started as a dancer before he realized it was way too tough to make it as a professional dancer. The adjacent space of writing, performing and releasing music had its allure, though – artists were building audiences with independently released songs and the Tamil film music industry too always remained ready to pick up rising talent.

That's exactly the space within which Paal Dabba thrived, turning rapper for songs like "3SHA" in 2022 and then "Ai," followed by the trippy "170CM," released via Think Music. With millions of views for a Technicolor mash like that, Paal Dabba went on to release "Sab" and has since worked in films including *Dhruva Natchathiram* with composer Harris Jayaraj ("His Name is John") and Aavesham with Kerala State Film Award-winner composer Sushin Shyam ("Galatta"). Fresh from his Australia shows and ahead of many more releases, Paal Dabba discusses influences and why he's not just a hip-hop artist.

**Rolling Stone India: You just got back from shows in Australia for the first time, right? How was that?**

**Paal Dabba:** I had a very good show there, bro. I did one show in Sydney and one in Melbourne. Crowd was crazy, bro. Really had a fun time.

I performed like two unreleased tracks. I was checking like people are getting the vibe or not. And they enjoyed it, bro. The two songs on the way for my next release.




**Was this your first international show? What was it like going abroad and what did you expect?**
It was my second. The first, I did it in Dubai.

I think about the crowd and how they're going to respond. When I went to Dubai, I had a very bad experience there. The crowd wasn't at all involved. They went to the back. That was very bad. Melbourne had a great crowd, though. The best thing is getting an opportunity to spread Tamil culture and music all over the world. I'm so happy about that.

**It's a very different space, Tamil music compared to the rest of India - you can work in films, you can work with Think Music and you can release your own music also. Is it a good space to be in?**
Yeah. I'm not a big fan of doing music in films right now. My happiness is when I release my own songs. I love doing independent music more than films, but I'm doing film music so that I can spread my indie scene music to everybody – that's the only reason. I love making indie music more than film songs.

**When you get so many offers from labels or to do film music, what do you have to watch out for, if anything when deciding about those projects?**
In the past, when I asked some people who did music with labels, they said many [bad] things. But seriously, there is no issue in that, bro. They are giving a lot of time for me. For '170CM,' I took four months to make it and I didn't get any pressure from [label] Think Music. They gave me a lot of time for my music. It depends on who you work with also. If they like your idea, they're ready to give you time, so there's no pressure.

**Dance is where it all started for you – what was it like making it as a professional dancer in India?**

It's very difficult. South side, in Chennai, to make a career in dance, it was very difficult for me. There's more competition. But within rap, people are coming out now but when I came up, there were fewer people who were claiming their space. So I thought I'll put the dance aspect in the rap scene and I can do both.

**What did you have to figure out as you dove into music and had your first release in 2022?**
If you go and see the first video, I made – I released the song '3SHA,' I don't have any plans. I wanted to release the song, I shot it on my phone, I edited it on my phone. There was no plan. I got a lot of appreciation for it. After that, I decided not to make any plans. I'm going to go with the flow. Because if I made a plan, then something else ends up happening, so I figured I don't want to plan anything.

**Lyrically, you're very Gen-Z in terms of mixing Tamil and English words and pop culture. What would you count as influences on your music?**
Afrobeats, bro. If you see my costumes, if you see my hairstyle, if you hear my songs, [you'll know] I'm more into Afrobeats. It helped me a lot. If I listen to their songs, I can see how much they play with vocals and the arrangements are crazy.

**How did you get introduced to it?**
I'm a dancer, so I used to listen to every genre out there. Every Saturday or Sunday or whenever my friends and I used to hang out, we'd share a lot of music, especially new music we would have discovered. That's how different types of music came to me and that's when I discovered Afrobeats and it got stuck in my head [*laughs*]. I wrote '170CM' around the same time that I was discovering this music.

**Tell me about "170 CM" and "Sab" – it feels like a universe you've created. What does it take to dream that up and bring it to life?**
Two things – I love directing videos. I put out a lot of dance choreography videos and love directing those as well. The second thing I'm doing, I'm entering into direction and editing, recently I started producing also, with 'SAB.'

When I started making rap, nobody came and helped me out as such. I asked for help from everyone but nobody came forward, so then I decided to learn everything on my own – how to direct, how to edit, I'm learning to produce music now.

If you see the videos I've put out so far, you can see the colorful tone. I love colors and in my costume, you can see that Afro influence. I always keep a story in mind when I create a music video. In 'Ai' and '170CM' you can see a story in those. I sit and draw up a story and build everything from it.

**Any dream collaborations on your list?**
It would be with Afrobeats artists like Rema, Omah Lay, Adekunle Gold and Ayra Starr.

**What's something that excites you about the future of music and one thing that worries you about it?**
That's a hard question. I think what excites me is that I get inspiration from so many things outside of music and if I'm making music, I often get inspired by some other music. In terms of what worries me – in the South, there are a lot of independent, extremely talented artists but they are not getting exposure.

Only if we come up and have a name, then we get picked up. But if they're good, they're not getting an opportunity just for being good.

**What's coming up in 2024?**
My next release is coming up. It's a song based on funk music and there's a music video. I love to explore different genres, so I made funk music. That song is called 'OCD.' After that, there's a song with OfRO – it's a total commercial, folk-type of song. There's also an R&B song coming up, with a producer named Shiva Pal.

**So you wouldn't want to be known as just a rapper or hip-hop artist?**
I don't want to be in a label like he's a rapper. I don't put me into that position. I want to explore into every music style.

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# riar saab

## Mumbai-based Punjabi breakthrough star takes us through his humble beginnings

***By* Aaryaman Trivedi**

AT JUST 23 years old, Riar Saab is on a singular mission — to meet the demands of his enthusiastic audience. The Punjabi hip-hop singer and songwriter received overnight fame when Bollywood actor Vicky Kaushal showcased his dance moves to the globally viral hit song "Obsessed". While the track catapulted Riar Saab to unprecedented heights of popularity, the young artist remains firmly grounded.

In a conversation with Rolling Stone India, Riar Saab emphasizes the universal appeal of music, transcending linguistic barriers, as he continues to deliver authentic Punjabi compositions to his diverse fanbase.

***Rolling Stone India*: Who is Riar Saab and what inspired the transition from your original stage name, Frenzzy, to Riar Saab?**
The name Riar Saab was given to me by Sikander Kahlon. Riar is my surname, so he said that the name "Frenzzy" doesn't suit your identity as a Punjabi rapper. So, while we were shooting, we were just talking, and then we decided that this should be the name.

**How has your upbringing influenced your musical style?**
I am from Gurdaspur (Pind Dhapai), Punjab. My whole family is there except for me, I stay here in Mumbai. Although I was born and raised in Mumbai, I am deeply connected to my roots because of the picturesque environment of my hometown. The experience of living on a farm and being surrounded by tractors during my upbringing holds a unique charm that is unparalleled.

**What was it like working with the Aavrutti music group in your early career?**
Aavrutti was our crew; there were four rappers. We connected through social media. I was the fourth one to join because Saifan was my college friend. He just once asked, "If you're doing solo, why not join our crew?" After that, we jammed together, and everyone released songs together. It was quite a different experience; I learned a lot about life. Even now, we jam together a lot.

**Can you share the story behind the creation of your viral hit 'Obsessed'?**
"Obsessed" was created by Abhijay Sharma and me in Abhijay's home studio within 2-3 hours. I had some specific ideas in my mind about the kind of song I wanted, so after that, we just kept vibing, and the song was made just like that, in a fun way, without much thought, whatever happened, happened. I used to listen to Abhijay's music, I knew he sings really well apart from music production. So, I felt it's not necessary to only do music production. If there's a collaboration, we should do something different, like incorporating classical music. So, we met again at Abhijay's home studio. We had already made one song before, and then I had come to Punjab. Abhijay said, "This vibe isn't working, when you come back, we'll make something else," and that's how "Obsessed" was made.

**What are the key themes you aim to explore in your music?**
After my proper hardcore rap in my genre, I included R&B/POP because I had a liking for singing along with rap. I used to record covers and listen to them myself. Even now, I'm working on various different ideas and styles. I always enjoy trying out new things.

In my lyrics, I like to talk about things that I observe around me personally or things that happen in my life. I prefer talking about those things, and mostly, I like to write about my own lifestyle in all my songs. There's always some story related to my life behind every song or lyric.

**How has your education at Guru Nanak Khalsa College contributed to your musical journey?**
**Riar Saab:** *Mujhe mere college mein kaafi kam log jaante the ke yeh rap wagere karta hai.* (Not a lot of people in college knew that I do rap because only my friends knew about it.) Nobody had an idea of what I was doing because that was just the initial period. There was an event in college where I performed, and that's when some others also got to know that, yes, this guy does rap, and the response was really good. Of course, those who didn't understand would also make fun of me for it [laughs].

**What role has your family, especially your sister, played in your pursuit of music?**
**Riar Saab:** My family has always been supportive, so there wasn't any situation created in life, nor did I have to face any difficulties. But my sister helped me a lot because of her, I am in this field today. She specifically handled everything at home, explained to me what I should do.

**How do you feel about the impact of social media on your career?**
**Riar Saab:** Because of social media, today, everything is easily accessible. Whatever message/news, etc., you want, you can easily find it anywhere. If there's any talent, just upload it, and the world will notice it tomorrow. But it's also easy that if you put something out hastily, it goes viral. The content should be such that people like it; only then will the world like it. If people are loving it, then yes, you're everywhere.

**How do you handle the pressure and expectations that come with viral success?**
**Riar Saab:** To tell the truth, I am the kind of guy who loves taking the local train to where I need to go – because that's just the Mumbai lifestyle. Since I'm from here, I like to live like everyone else. I don't feel anything different; if I'm on the train, people meet me, if I'm on the street, people meet me. So, I just like to live normally like that.

**What has been the most surreal moment of your career so far?**
**Riar Saab:** The happiest day of my entire career was when Vicky Kaushal uploaded a reel with my song, and then, you know what happened. And then, the love that the song received was on another level. The whole crowd sang along at the show; that experience was on a completely different level.

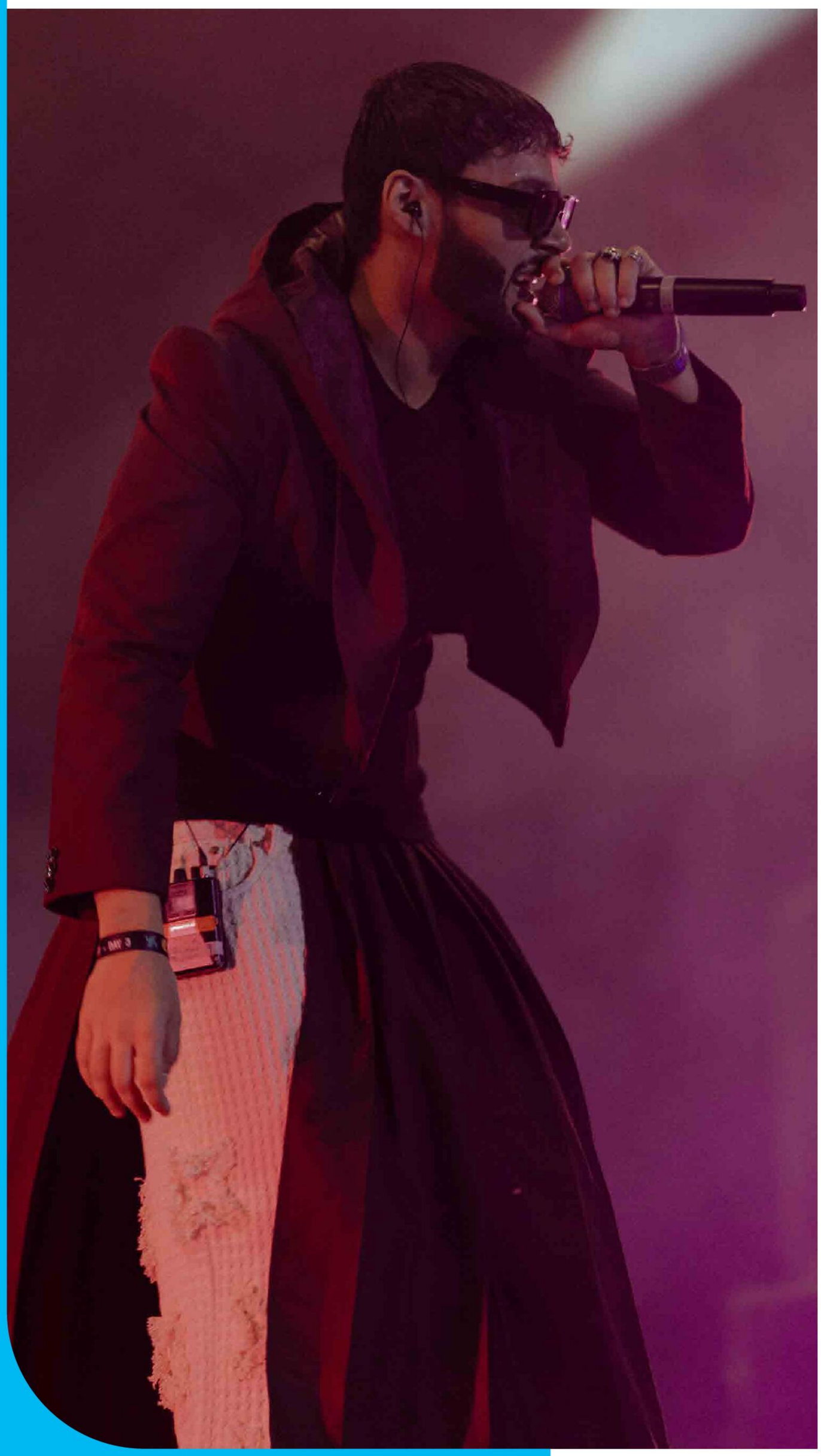
**Can you tell us about any upcoming projects or collaborations you're excited about?**
Besides my career, if I've thought of anything, it's this, that I dream of having something like a farmhouse for animals, where we can adopt and take care of them properly, like an NGO.

**How do you stay grounded amid the fame and attention?**
**Riar Saab:** *Bas wohi reason hai kyuki jaha se hum aaye hai woh roots toh kabhi nai bhulna chyea specially woh logo ko nai bhulna chyea jo humare saath the phele din se but street se kaafi kuch seekha hai toh lifestyle bhi uss tareeke ka hai.* (That's the reason because where we come from, we should never forget our roots, especially not the people who have been with us since day one. We've learned a lot from the streets, so the lifestyle is also like that.)

"THERE'S ALWAYS SOME STORY RELATED TO MY LIFE BEHIND EVERY SONG OR LYRIC."

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# tricksingh



**Despite sustaining severe injuries from a dreadful accident on set, tricksingh remains resilient and is committed to his craft**

***By* Peony Hirwani**

TRICKSINGH'S JOURNEY into the world of music began long before he started releasing his tracks on streaming platforms two years ago. From his earliest memories of listening to his dad's cassette tapes during car rides to being selected as the lead singer in kindergarten, music has always been his calling. His teenage years were filled with diverse musical experiences, from performing for the government of India to gracing the stage in the Lion King Broadway production in London.

Despite briefly veering away from his musical ambitions to pursue corporate aspirations, the 24-year-old's heart remained tethered to his musical roots. His resurgence in music during college marked the dawn of a fresh era. With his debut song released in September 2022, tricksingh started off on a new journey. In an exclusive interview with Rolling Stone India, the "Samjh Na Aundi" singer delves into his journey, sharing insights on overcoming setbacks, including a daunting accident during a music video shoot, and how his determination to carve his mark on the musical landscape shines through.

**Rolling Stone India: tricksingh, it's been two years since you started releasing your music on streaming platforms. Did you ever imagine this is how your life will pan out?**

**tricksingh:** You know, there's this innate talent that everyone seems to possess, right? Well, for me, it's always been music. I recall fondly listening to my dad's cassette tapes during car rides and having record players at home that I was absolutely fixated on. But let me tell you about this moment in kindergarten, when they lined us all up and, lo and behold, I was the one they singled out and said, "You, you'll be the lead singer from now on." That was the beginning of my journey. From kindergarten until about 11th or 12th grade, I was the lead singer in various school bands. Eventually, I formed my own band—a cozy acoustic setup. That passion led me to participate in India Idol Jr, where I displayed my talent.

I've had diverse experiences with music since childhood. From performing for the government of India to support dyslexic children to being part of the Lion King Broadway production in London, music has been a significant part of my life.

**Wow, your life has always been about music and your career aspirations have revolved around it since long ago, right?**

Yes and no. As I grew older, I found myself drifting away from music a little. It wasn't that I lost my passion, but rather, I felt a sense of embarrassment pursuing a career in music while my peers were chasing more conventional paths like consultancy. This led me to prioritize my corporate ambitions.

However, during college, I had a change of heart and decided to give music another shot. I started an acoustic act in India, armed with my ukulele and guitar, performing self-composed acoustic songs at restaurants. It was a mixed experience; some venues paid me nothing, while others offered a small sum. Nonetheless, having my friends cheering me on made it feel worthwhile, especially since

I hailed from Chandigarh, where community support runs deep.

Despite these performances, I lacked the confidence to move forward with recording my songs. I have a collection of around 30 indie acoustic tracks that I recorded but never released. Eventually, I abruptly halted my musical pursuits, leaving behind this trove of unreleased material.

I transitioned into the corporate world and began working for a sneaker marketplace called Soul Search. My role involved leading community initiatives and marketing efforts. Through this job, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in India's cultural scene and connect with creatives. Surrounded by these individuals, I began to realize that there's a niche for creative expression in India, despite being surrounded by people who may not understand it.

This newfound environment energized me and instilled the confidence to start sharing my music again. However, I reached a point where I wanted my music to reflect my identity rather than conform to a predefined mold.

**What happened after that? Talk to me about the time you released your first song/music video.**

I rallied all my friends together for my first few songs, because I had no budget or resources. It was a true do-it-yourself endeavor, with everyone pitching in for the cause. I enlisted the help of a photographer friend and put my best effort into the project. My debut song was released in September 2022, marking the start of my musical journey. Although it didn't go viral, the response was deeply encouraging. It garnered a dedicated following, with those who resonated with the art reaching out to express their appreciation. I even secured my first few press features, which was a validating experience.

This positive reception fueled my confidence, leading me to release two or three more projects. From then on, momentum kept building. However, I didn't want to limit myself to just making music. Inspired by the likes of A$AP Rocky and Tyler, The Creator, I aspired to become a multifaceted cultural figure. Thus, visuals became integral to my identity. From my fashion choices to the overall aesthetic, everything was curated with the intention of being at the forefront of cultural trends.

**"I PREFER TO LET MY MUSIC REFLECT THE RAWNESS OF THE MOMENT, SERVING AS A GENUINE SNAPSHOT OF MY JOURNEY."**

**What is your music making process like?**

I view music as a way to encapsulate a specific moment in my life. I believe that if I over-polish it, it can start to feel artificial. Therefore, I prefer to let my music reflect the rawness of the moment, serving as a genuine snapshot of my journey. That's why my music spans across various styles and genres, ranging from melodic singing to intense rap. I want each track to authentically express whatever emotions or experiences I'm going through at the time.

**I see. What about collaborations? Any wish-list artists or producers that you want to work with in future?**

So far, tricksingh has not engaged in any collaborations. I've been primarily focused on developing my own sound and establishing my presence in the music scene. While I feel fortunate to have had these opportunities, my next step involves collaborating with artists whom I've admired. I already have a few collaborations in the works, including tracks with Hasan Raheem and AFKAP. These collaborations will add depth to my repertoire, especially after establishing my solo work.

Additionally, I'm working with some of my favorite producers to incorporate old Bollywood samples into my music. This approach blends nostalgia with freshness, catering to our generation's tastes.

**Why did you decide to leave your management and fly solo?**

I had a brief stint with management for about one or two months, but then I decided to part ways and manage myself. Along the way, I've made connections in the industry on my own and learned valuable lessons from those who have approached me directly. Instead of having someone represent me, I've taken the initiative to engage with industry veterans personally. This approach has allowed them to understand my journey and what I aim to achieve. Being self-managed has been a learning experience, and receiving advice from industry experts has guided me on how to navigate this path.

**You recently had a serious accident while shooting a music video. What exactly happened??**

That particular project was with Def Jam. However, during the shoot, an unfortunate incident occurred. It was around 3 a.m., and we were at a location with stairs that lacked proper railing. While navigating the steps, I inadvertently misstepped, causing me to fall backward. The impact was significant—I felt the sharp pain immediately. The fall resulted in severe injuries, including a cracked cheekbone and nose.

**How come this incident not scare you? You were back releasing music a month after this accident.**

Honestly, I'm feeling a bit scared, but what keeps me going is my burning desire to become a truly great artist.

**Nice, I'm impressed. Tirath, I'm curious, who's your dream international artist to collaborate with?**

Karan Aujla may be based in Canada, but I really admire his work, so him.

As for international collaborations, I think Central Cee would be an exciting artist to collaborate with.

**Why do you personally think you define the future of music in India?**

My authenticity makes me a pivotal figure in the future of music.

**Nice. tricksingh, what can we expect from you in terms of upcoming projects and music?**

So, I suppose fans can anticipate an EP, along with some unexpected cross-cultural collaborations—artists you wouldn't typically associate with a Punjabi artist. Additionally, there'll be plenty of exciting integrations beyond just music.

COURTESY OF ARTIST

# yadnesh raikar

This Mumbai-maestro has grown up around the greats and now seeks to redefine what Indian classical music can be

***By*** **Aaryaman Trivedi**

SUCCESS CAN BE achieved at a young age. Shri Yadnesh Raikar, who accepts the prefixed title to honor and respect those who have been granted immense accolades in the field of classical music, started playing and performing at the age of four. Having been the son and disciple of renowned Violinist Swarpradnya Pandit Milind Raikar, greatness was expected. Rolling Stone India spoke with Yadnesh Raikar to explore how he chooses to navigate the very same greatness.

***Rolling Stone India*: What inspired you to start learning the violin at such a young age?**
Music has always been an integral part of my life, I grew up around it. I grew up listening to my father, Pandit Milind Raikar who is a renowned musician himself. Being around him, his contemporaries and listening to other legendary musicians like Ustad Amir Khan, Pandit Jasraj, Vidhushi Kishori Amonkar, Pandit Nikhil Banerjee, I started getting inclined towards music as a kid. I started learning tabla when I was a year and half old and leaned towards playing violin when I was

2 and half years old. My parents often told me about a few incidents where I precisely gave them signs of ideal musicians with inclination towards music and rhythm.

**How has your musical journey evolved since your first performance at the age of 4?**
My upbringing has been truly remarkable, filled with wonderful experiences. Being recognized as a child prodigy meant that many people listened to me and had high expectations. My journey began with my first concert at the age of 4, and back then, I approached the stage without fear. However, as I grew older and started performing more professionally, my perspective on concerts shifted. I now see them as a responsibility, a duty to the world to share my music on a larger scale.

**Can you share the influence your father, Pt. Milind Raikar, has had on your music?**
It's refreshing that you mentioned music in general, not just classical music. During a brief period when I solely focused on Indian classical music, my father, my mentor helped me broaden my musical horizons. He introduced me to various genres such as jazz, Bollywood, Western, and cross-cultural music, allowing me to explore different aspects of music. He is a true musician who expanded the scope of my musical journey. His influence extends beyond classical music and has had a profound impact on both my musical and personal life. I consider myself incredibly fortunate and blessed to have had him as my mentor.

**What are the challenges and rewards of being a child prodigy in classical music?**
Being a child prodigy in classical music presents a unique set of challenges and rewards. While it's undoubtedly a privilege to be recognized and admired at such a young age, it also comes with immense pressure and expectations. The constant spotlight can easily inflate one's ego, but I'm grateful to my parents for instilling in me the *sanskar* (culture) of humility, which has been invaluable in navigating this journey.

The expectations placed upon me require constant diligence in practice, honing of my skills, and a commitment to proving myself repeatedly. The music industry demands that one not only possess talent but also continuously evolve as an artist.

There's also constant comparison, not only with peers but often with revered figures like one's own Guru, which can be daunting. Yet, amidst these challenges, there's a lot of joy in the experiences and opportunities that come with being part of the music industry at such a young age. I feel privileged to have been in this stage of life where I get to inspire people. Apart from all the challenges, life experiences, early exposure, the countless love and blessings that I have been showered with have motivated me a lot. That's one big reward I carry with myself.

Ultimately, it's all trial and triumph, but the rewards of touching lives and leaving a lasting impact make it all worthwhile.

**How do you balance tradition with innovation in your violin performances?**
I learnt from strict traditionalists such as Pandit Milind Raikar and Pandit Arun Kashalkar. I was also blessed to be mentored by Padmavibhushan Kishori Amonkar and Dr. L Subramaniam who have been innovators in their era. Under the tutelage of diverse Gurus, I've developed a unique approach to Indian classical music. This blend of tradition and innovation has shaped my vision as I strive to introduce Indian classical music to a wider, younger audience in the mainstream media.

I've always sought ways to make Indian classical music more engaging for today's listeners without compromising its core values. By enhancing its aesthetic appeal and introducing elements like multiple percussion arrangements, *jugalbandis*, *sawal-jawab* sessions, and unique raga interpretations, I aim to draw the audience closer to the music's essence. Interactive sessions that invite listeners to experience the depth of *aalaps* with closed eyes help them discover the true beauty of our classical heritage.

It lies in the peace that's created, of course without leaving the traditional aspects. By doing all of this, I understand that Music has its own expression and expressing music is something I'm very good at. It is very personal to me but I enjoy giving every bit of me and my music to people.

**How do you see the role of classical music in contemporary Indian society?**
I love this question! The contemporary society today is changing. People today are slowly turning into experimental listeners. By its nature, I feel Classical Music is experimental music too, It's all spontaneous, and improv. Indian classical music has its own place in their industry, but about fitting in the contemporary society, I think I am a neo classicist who is trying to bring in the change within my capacity of bringing classical music to the mainstream media. My aim is to place Indian classical music on the same platforms and playlists where people enjoy indie or pop songs. It's about weaving the timeless with the contemporary, ensuring that classical music doesn't just survive but thrives. And there's a growing openness among listeners. More and more, people are starting to explore and appreciate the depth and beauty of classical music, which is a promising sign.

With time, things will change. Classical music is eternal. Ragas are timeless. Unlike a song, you would listen to it for months, years on end, but a Raga would sound different every time you listen to it. It isn't rigid, it is a spontaneous art form. The concert I play today will never be the same two days later or 10 years later. I genuinely hope I contribute to the change where people listen to classical as much as they listen to any other genre they regularly listen to.

**How do you stay motivated and continue to grow as a musician?**
I believe a true student of the arts is always on a continuous learning journey.

My mentors have always encouraged me to experiment with music, fostering an environment where I can delve deeper into my craft. I've consistently immersed myself in the pursuit of knowledge, driven by a hunger to improve not only my skills on the violin but also my understanding of music as a whole. This relentless quest for growth is what motivates me and fuels my development as an artist. It's essential to broaden your perspective and approach to music.

Every encounter with fellow musicians presents an opportunity for learning. I strive to absorb something valuable from each interaction, recognizing that there's no definitive distinction between good or bad music—only what resonates with you personally. I eagerly seize any chance to expand my knowledge and skills because I believe that the journey of an artist is perpetual and never ending. Witnessing the remarkable accomplishments of legendary artists across various genres serves as a humbling reminder of how much more there is to explore and achieve.

I hold deep reverence for the art that has been entrusted to me, cherishing it and aspiring to evolve alongside it. My appetite for learning is insatiable—I'm always eager to discover more.

**What are your future aspirations as a musician and composer?**
When people talk about violin, the first name that comes out should be Yadnesh Raikar.

My aspiration is to establish a community where classical music is embraced as a regular part of people's lives. Through my violin, I aim to touch the hearts of countless individuals, reaching into every household.

I am driven by a desire for change, seeking to enhance the status of Indian classical music within contemporary society, particularly among younger generations. My ultimate goal is to be recognized as one of the greats in this field.

Above all, I am on a mission to spread peace and love through my music. This is more than a passion—it's a calling.



COURTESY OF ARTIST

# meet rolling stone u.s.' 25 future of music artists

## From Peso Pluma to J Noa, Samia and more

### Peso Pluma
Mexican artist Peso Pluma embarks on a musical exodus with his new album which is set to be released later this year, mixing his rich cultural heritage and electrifying soundscapes.

### Faye Webster
Faye Webster's music embodies a unique blend of indie folk and R&B, characterized by her soulful vocals and introspective lyrics, captivating audiences with her intimate storytelling and haunting melodies.

### John Summit
John Summit, the rising star in the electronic dance music scene, showcases unparalleled energy and creativity in his sets, seamlessly blending infectious beats and pulsating rhythms to ignite dance floors.

### Masicka
Dancehall sensation Masicka infuses his music with electrifying rhythms and Afrobeat influences, delivering dynamic performances that has solidified his position as a trailblazer in the genre.

### Lola Brooke
Brooklyn rap prodigy Lola Brooke commands attention with her fierce lyricism and magnetic stage presence, embodying the essence of authenticity and paving her way to hip-hop stardom.

### The Last Dinner Party
Indie rock band The Last Dinner Party confronts sexism head-on with their music, challenging stereotypes and advocating for inclusivity, while crafting infectious melodies.

### MC Abdul
Hailing from Palestine's Gaza Strip, MC Abdul channels his experiences into powerful rap narratives, blending poignant storytelling with hypnotic beats to shed light on social issues and amplify marginalized voices.

### Jasiel Nuñez
Versatile songwriter Jasiel Nuñez's artistry is known for his poignant lyricism and compelling melodies which has helped him create a captivating body of work.

### Ryan Castro
Colombia-bred Ryan Castro's his art is filled with rich cultural influences accompanied by his vibrant and dynamic sound.

### J Noa
Dominican MC J Noa brings forth fierce rhymes to the forefront, cementing her place as a rising star in the hip-hop scene.

### Omah Lay
Through his music which is a unique blend of Afrobeat and R&B, Omah Lay delivers a distinctive style while also addressing important societal issues.

### Teezo Touchdown
Teezo Touchdown has been making waves on tour with Travis Scott and catching the attention of Drake with his eclectic sound and impressive showmanship.

### Chappell Roan
Rising pop artist Chappell Roan embraces her LGBTQ identity through authentic songwriting showcasing raw vulnerability through the music.

### Yovngchimi
Originating from Puerto Rico, Yovngchimi pioneers Latin trap by blending traditional elements with modern beats that transcends cultural boundaries.

### Wyatt Flores
Wyatt Flores courageously addresses mental health struggles, offering solace and understanding through his music.

### Black Sherif
Ghana artist Black Sherif revolutionizes African music with his characteristic style, blending Afrobeat with immersive lyrics that have resonated globally.

### Peggy Gou
Peggy Gou, the innovative DJ and producer's latest track "(It Goes Like) Nanana" effortlessly juxtaposes electronic beats with infectious rhythms, that has dominated the TikTok.

### Samia
indie songwriter Samia fearlessly explores themes of anxiety and vulnerability in her music, resonating deeply with audiences for its raw honesty and emotional depth.

### Saiko
Spanish reggaeton artist Saiko offers a fresh perspective of the genre through his eclectic style.

### Young Nudy
Young Nudy spices up the hip-hop scene with tracks like "Peaches & Eggplants," and collaborating with 21 Savage to deliver raw energy and undeniable charisma.

### Le Sserafim
K-pop sensation Le Sserafim mesmerizes with their electrifying performances, paving their way to stardom with hits and captivating crowds major festivals like Coachella.

### Scowl
Hardcore band Scowl unleashes relentless energy and aggression in their new music, pushing boundaries with their raw intensity and uncompromising sound, solidifying their place in the hardcore scene.

### Young Miko
Puerto Rico rapper Young Miko infuses vibrant beats and catchy melodies, following in the footsteps of Karol G, showcasing his potential in the Latin music scene.

### Veeze
Representing Detroit Veeze brings fresh vibes to rap with his new music, blending gritty lyrics with solid beats.

### Mirror
Hong Kong boy band Mirror have managed to break into the U.S. with their melodious tunes and rich cultural fusion.

### Lizzie No
Acclaimed singer Lizzie No delves deep into introspection with her latest album Halfsies, weaving an emotional narrative and moody melodies that offer authenticity and heartfelt sincerity.



Peso Pluma

ERIKA GOLDRING/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

# meet rolling stone u.k.'s 25 future of music artists

## From Central Cee to Anish Kumar, Porji and more

### Central Cee
Central Cee, a powerhouse in U.K. rap, has been dominating charts, arenas, and billboards since 2019. His dynamic talent and drill roots mark him as the present and future of music.

### Master Peace
Master Peace defies labels as an indie artist by challenging stereotypes. His debut album, *How to Make a Master Peace*, redefines indie for 2024, inspiring underrepresented voices in music.

### NewDad
NewDad's debut album *Madra* solidifies them as leaders in Gen-Z shoegaze, standing alongside genre pioneers. With hopes to set standards and reach wider audiences, they're ready to go far.

### Caity Baser
Caity Baser's rise includes nominations for BRITs Rising Star and BBC Radio 1 Sound Of 2024 awards. Her mixtape *Still Learning* blends sugary pop with honest lyrics and sarcastic charm.

### Lava La Rue
Lava La Rue, a musical polymath, transitions from the NiNE8 collective to becoming genre-spanning star. Their eclectic sounds blend rap with 70s vibes, reflecting their diverse upbringing in south London.

### Sam Tompkins
Rising star Sam Tompkins has sold out the Hammersmith Apollo and also tackles mental health on his debut album *Hi, My Name Is Insecure*. His poignant lyrics resonate, offering solace and fostering conversation.

### Big Special
Big Special's sound captures Britain's malaise with punk spirit and electronic beats. Singer Joe Hicklin's powerhouse vocals lead a dance through darkness, offering solidarity in uncertainty.

### Anish Kumar
Anish Kumar, a rising force in British dance music, blends house and disco with South Asian influences. His release *A Mixtape by Anish Kumar* showcases his inventive sound, setting him apart in 2024.

### Lambrini Girls
Lambrini Girls, Phoebe Lunny and Lilly Macieira, embody the lively spirit of their namesake drink. With killer riffs and a fiery attitude, they challenge prejudice and ignite passion, destined for greater heights in 2024.

### Ren
Ren captivates with charisma and honesty, addressing auto-immune conditions through tracks. His debut album *Sick Boi* showcases musicality and profound storytelling, resonating deeply with listeners.

### Nia Archives
Nia Archives leads the jungle revival single-handedly, with effervescent anthems earning her Beyoncé's support. Her signature sound dominates festivals, while her advocacy spotlights Black women in music's past and future.

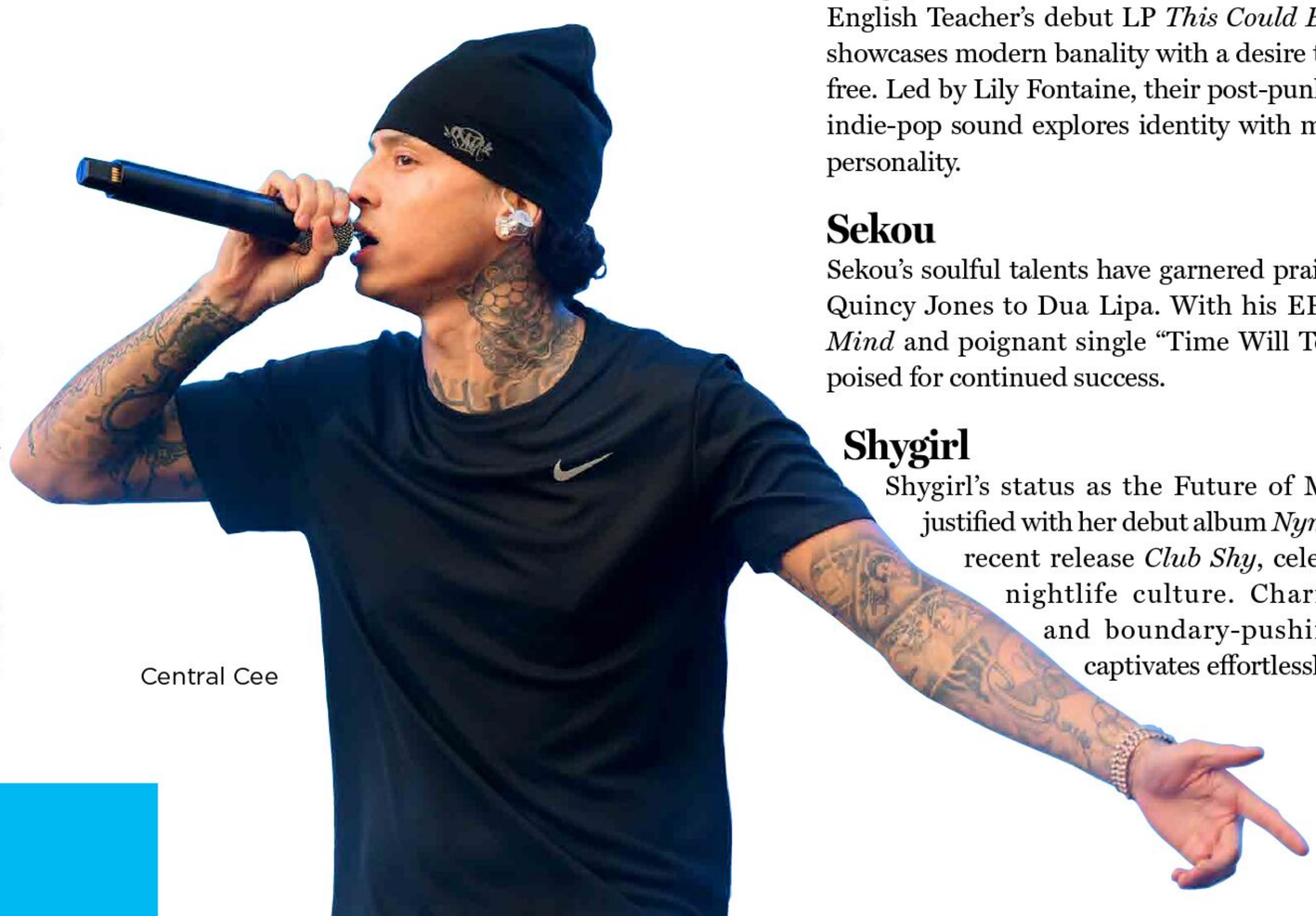
### Rachel Chinouriri
Rachel Chinouriri defies labels with her debut album, blending alt-rock guitars with indie-pop melodies. Her music inspires young girls interested in rock, paving the way for future artists.

### Chy Cartier
Tottenham rapper Chy Cartier embodies the rich musical heritage of her neighborhood. With her dexterous wordplay and ambitious beats, her recent single "BOSSED UP" marks her as the next London rap sensation.

### AntsLive
London rapper AntsLive asserts his path to greatness in U.K. rap with his mixtape Just a Matter of Time. His bold manifesto on "Number One Candidate" and viral visuals showcase his vision and commitment.

### Porji
Porij's journey, from navigating a pandemic to rebuilding after member departures, culminates in their debut album Teething. Their eclectic pop sound, influenced by rave, indie, and garage, captivates with freshness and depth.

### Barry Can't Swim
Barry Can't Swim, led by Joshua Mainnie, emerges as a vibrant force in U.K. dance music. Their diverse debut album *When Will We Land?* showcases Mainnie's attention to detail and infectious energy, promising a breakout year.



Central Cee

MATTHEW BAKER/GETTY IMAGES

### Griff
Griff blends emotional lyricism reminiscent of Lorde with catchy hooks akin to Taylor Swift. Her self-produced songs draw inspiration from Grimes and Imogen Heap, promising a bold future in pop music.

### High Vis
High Vis, a London five-piece, brings hardcore ethic to their swirling, melodic sound reminiscent of Madchester. Their brutally honest lyrics resonate deeply, making them a standout in the genre.

### Elmiene
Making waves is British singer-songwriter Elmiene British by blending classic soul with neo-soul influences like D'Angelo. With his breakout track "Golden" and collaborations with Stormzy and Sampha, he's being heard globally.

### Sprints
Sprints' debut album *Letter to Self* sets the tone for the year with spiky riffs and powerful narratives. Their energetic rock sound promises to ignite moshpits and establish them as a defining band.

### Lynks
Lynks, the gimp mask-wearing pop sensation, unleashes debut album *Abomination* with raucous energy and witty lyrics tackling taboo topics. Their blend of humor and depth promises explosive success in 2024.

### The Last Dinner Party
The Last Dinner Party emerges as the most exciting British band in a generation. Their debut album *Prelude to Ecstasy* blends stadium anthems with baroque pop, marking them as future superstars.

### English Teacher
English Teacher's debut LP *This Could Be Texas* showcases modern banality with a desire to break free. Led by Lily Fontaine, their post-punk to 80s indie-pop sound explores identity with magnetic personality.

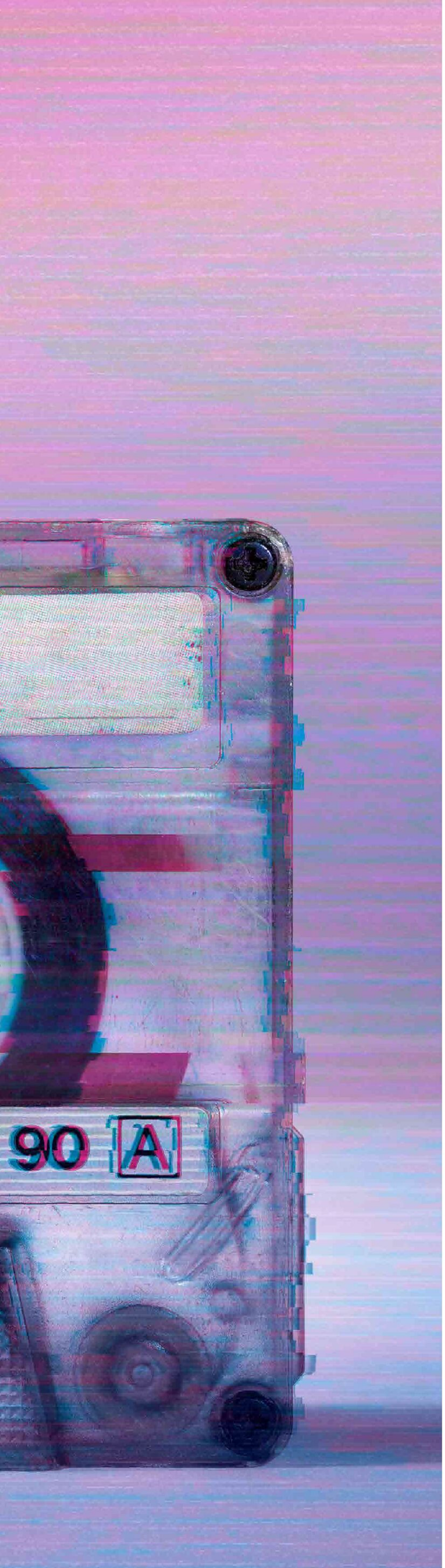
### Sekou
Sekou's soulful talents have garnered praise from Quincy Jones to Dua Lipa. With his EP *Out of Mind* and poignant single "Time Will Tell," he's poised for continued success.

### Shygirl
Shygirl's status as the Future of Music is justified with her debut album *Nymph* and recent release *Club Shy*, celebrating nightlife culture. Charismatic and boundary-pushing, she captivates effortlessly.

# RESHAPING THE FUTURE OF MUSIC

**How digital collectibles, especially for live events, have a tremendous potential**

***By*** **PRATHIK KARTHIKEYAN AND GARV SULTANIA**




As technology advances at an astonishing rate, its transformative impact is felt across myriad fields and industries. The realm of music is no exception; here, burgeoning technologies promise not only to redefine the enjoyment of music and live events for fans but also to forge novel pathways for organizers, artists and brands. There have been remarkable instances where the adoption of cutting-edge technologies has broadened our expectations, illuminating new possibilities in how these innovations meld with the live music experience. This ongoing evolution speaks to a sophisticated intertwining of art and technology, hinting at a future where the boundaries of musical engagement and creation are continually expanded and reimagined.

The groundbreaking Travis Scott concert in Fortnite is a prime example of how Virtual Reality (VR) and immersive technologies are revolutionizing live music events. Hosted in the popular game Fortnite in 2020, this event attracted over 12 million in-game attendees, offering a spectacular blend of music with interactive, game-like elements. Far from a passive experience, the concert was an immersive spectacle where attendees engaged with the environment and the performance in unprecedented ways. Visual and audio effects created a surreal experience, featuring giant astral projections, underwater sequences, and a roller coaster ride through space, all perfectly synchronized with Travis Scott's discography.

This concert showcased VR's potential to transform traditional concerts into engaging, communal experiences that extend beyond physical limitations, allowing artists to reach a global audience and push creative boundaries. It signalled a shift towards integrating VR and gaming platforms in live music, highlighting VR's role in enhancing the industry by enabling unique, immersive experiences. The success of the Travis Scott event in Fortnite underlines the growing interest in such innovative approaches to live music, pointing towards a future where virtual concerts are a staple, breaking down geographical barriers and opening new avenues for artist-audience connections. This significant milestone illustrates the transformative impact of melding music, technology, and virtual reality, reshaping the live music landscape for artists, organizers, and fans worldwide.

The potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to revolutionize not only editing and production but also to transform data analysis and enhance decision-making processes is immense. Traditionally, analysing trends, consumer behavior, and resource allocation in the context of live events and music was a somewhat experimental endeavor, often limited by human capacity for detail and precision. However, AI introduces the capability to dissect these elements with unprecedented accuracy and depth. By harnessing AI, the intricacies of "Xs and Os" - the minutiae of operational and organizational strategies - can be examined and understood in ways that significantly elevate the efficiency and effectiveness of live events and music industry practices. This advancement promises to not only refine but radically improve the mechanics behind the scenes, offering a smarter, more insightful approach to navigating the complexities of the entertainment world.

The advent of digital collectibles has marked a significant milestone across various industries, with its impact particularly pronounced in certain sectors. For example, NBA Top Shot has redefined sports memorabilia, granting fans the unprecedented ability to own, exchange, and amass digital highlights of pivotal moments and players in basketball history. These digital collectibles capture game-winning shots and rim rattling dunks, offer a dynamic connection between fans and the sport's biggest stars. In the gaming world, Ubisoft Quartz is integrating digital collectibles into its games. This innovation allows players to acquire unique, blockchain-verified in game items, adding a layer of exclusivity and proprietorship to the gaming experience. This not only elevates the player's immersion but also ushers in a novel mode of interaction within the digital gaming realms.

With the impact of digital collectibles in proximate fields, the potential for digital collectibles in live music and live events at large is tremendous. Imagine a world where your passion for music extends beyond playlists to fill a personal gallery with exclusive digital keepsakes. This reality, emerging in today's digital era, strengthens the bond between music enthusiasts and their beloved artists through digital collectibles, echoing the rhythm of innovation.

Digital collectibles redefine fan merchandise as an ever-accessible, exclusive array of items for fans to purchase, collect, and exchange online. These digital collectibles act as keys to an immersive fan club, offering backstage passes to a world brimming with exclusive content.

The advent of digital collectibles transcends traditional fan engagement, enabling access to unique experiences the likes of which has never been seen before. This allows fans a deeper connection with the music they love, available anytime, anywhere. For artists, digital collectibles are a blend of creative freedom and financial stability, offering a new revenue stream amidst the shifting dynamics of the music industry.

Astrix wants to be a part of this revolution in music, empowering artists to create and distribute their digital collectibles, thereby returning control to the creators. It's a global stage where each purchase directly supports the artists, turning every ticket into a collectible experience. Beyond collecting, digital collectibles offer fans novel experiences such as interactive activities with artists, exclusive memorabilia, or backstage concert access. This approach not only cultivates a community of dedicated fans but also provides artists a means to reward loyalty, creating a unique bond. Digital collectibles thus emerge as symbols of true fandom, offering a creative solution to engaging audiences and identifying dedicated supporters, while creating a passive revenue stream for artists and organizers.

As we stand on the brink of a new era in the music industry, the fusion of technology and art is crafting experiences that were once deemed unimaginable. The symbiosis of VR, AI, and digital collectibles with live music is not just a testament to technological progress but a herald of the transformative potential of these innovations to enrich the human experience. By breaking down the barriers between artists and fans, these technologies are not only reshaping the landscape of live events but are also redefining the essence of musical engagement. As we move forward, the continued integration of these technologies promises to usher in a future where music is more accessible, interactive, and immersive than ever before. ®

# Regina King

## *The actress on playing Shirley Chisholm, directing, and grief*

**You're playing Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to run for president. Do you find that with historical figures who reach mythic proportions, their accomplishments can supersede the more grounded facts about them?**

*King's film 'Shirley' premiered on Netflix on March 22.*

I think that's true with any great figure. Whether it's a slice-of-life or a cradle-to-grave biography, I'm not interested in dedicating two hours to watching [something] and walking away not feeling any different.

**What was most important to you with your approach to this portrayal?**

The emotional likeness and the interior of Shirley. Imitating becomes a caricature a lot of the time. The biggest thing that I was concerned about [was that] my portrayal or embodiment of Shirley would be seen as an imitation as opposed to a celebration of a human being.... Hopefully, people will walk away more interested in galvanizing around someone [who] has that much fight in them. I'm not gonna try to even touch the political conversation because it's just so disappointing right now. I just wish I had some of that Shirley good-fight energy.

**After the critical success of *One Night in Miami,* were you surprised more directing opportunities weren't banging down your door?**

There were definitely directing opportunities there. What I would say is they were opportunities that weren't of interest to me. Unfortunately, this [is] a business of people wanting to be first at being second — all of a sudden you get an influx of civil rights scripts or scripts in a hotel, scripts in one room.

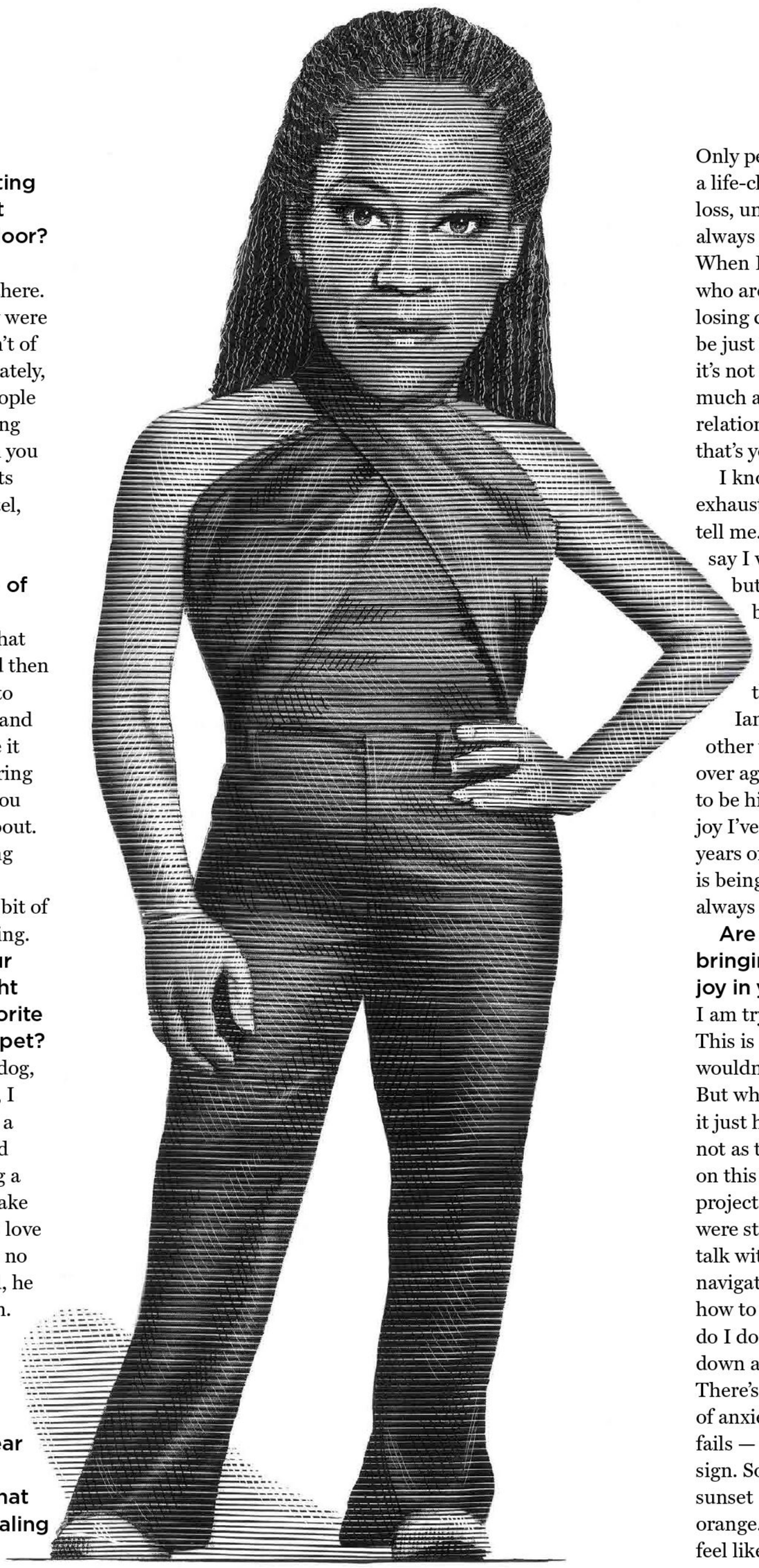
**What draws you in about the experience of directing?**

I love being the person that the idea starts from. And then you give these thoughts to your department heads, and they get excited and take it even further, and then bring things to the table that you may not have thought about. It's really fun. I love doing puzzles. Hardcore. I'm a puzzler. And so maybe a bit of that spirit is what's exciting.

**I know you and your dog are on a walk right now. What's your favorite thing about having a pet?**

Earl was [my son] Ian's dog, and when Ian moved on, I just felt like it ... I'm still a very spiritual person, and I felt like Ian was putting a lot of things in place to take care of me. And Earl, his love is unconditional. There's no judgment. When I'm sad, he just runs across the room. He thinks he's a small dog — he's 90 pounds — and he will literally try to hug me.

**I was so sorry to hear about your son Ian's passing [in 2022]. What has the process of healing looked like for you?**



Only people who have suffered a life-changing loss, traumatic loss, understand that you're always in a place of healing. When I speak to other people who are 16 or 18 years in after losing children, they seem to be just as broken as I am. So it's not so much healing as much as accepting that your relationship with [the] person that's your life has changed.

I know my baby was exhausted because he would tell me. And it's selfish to say I wish he was still here, but I don't want him to be here in pain. So it's acceptance. Accepting that the universe chose this as a journey for Ian. I wouldn't have it any other way. I would do it all over again the same way just to be his mother. The most joy I've ever received in my 53 years of being on this earth is being Ian's mom. And I'm always gonna be his mom.

**Are there other things bringing you peace and joy in your life right now?**

I am trying to figure that out. This is a devastating thing. I wouldn't wish this on anyone. But when you live out publicly, it just hits different. You're just not as trusting. Having to go on this journey of promoting projects because they all were started before, I had to talk with my team on how to navigate. Because I don't know how to not talk about Ian. How do I do that and not break down and be out of control? There's this constant kind of anxiety. And then it never fails — Ian will send me a sign. Sometimes a sunrise and sunset — Ian's favorite color is orange. They get me through. I feel like it's a hug. CT JONES

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**